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

AMBASSADOR VICTOR L. TOMSETH

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This interview has not been edited by Ambassador Tomseth]

Q: Today is May 13, 1999. This is an interview with Victor L. Tomseth. This is being done on behalf of The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

To start with, when and where were you born and could you tell me something about your parents and your family?

TOMSETH: I was born in Eugene, Oregon and grew up in Springfield, which is right next door. I was there for the first 22 years of my life. I went to the University of Oregon, which is in Eugene.

My father's parents were Norwegian immigrants. They actually met in Minnesota, however, and married there and then came out to the Northwest in the early part of the 19th century.

My mother's background is basically Scotch Irish out of the hills of Appalachia early in the 18th century and through the Midwest and eventually to the West Coast, California and then Oregon. Springfield is a very working class, blue collar town. All of my family on both sides were either saw millers or loggers. As I said, I went to the University of Oregon.

Q: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

TOMSETH: I have one brother, younger, and one sister, younger.

Q: Were your parents college graduates?

TOMSETH: No.

Q: Very few of our generation have parents who went to college. It was less than 10% of the population.

TOMSETH: Yes, probably. They were high school graduates, but no college. A few of my older cousins had gone to college before I went.

Q: What about at home? Was it a family who sit around the table discussing things, read, or not? How did it work?

TOMSETH: Well, this is sort of jumping ahead a little bit. When I was a kid, my parents bought a set of "The World Book Encyclopedia" at one point. I subsequently told people that I think I probably passed the Foreign Service written examination because I memorized that.

Q: This was something that grabbed you?

TOMSETH: Not the Foreign Service. I had no idea what that was. But I was interested in the world. My father was a member of the National Geographic Society, so I grew up looking at those and studying the maps.

Q: In what year were you born?

TOMSETH: 1941.

Q: So World War II was not part of your background.

TOMSETH: No. I remember Roosevelt dying in April of 1945 and the end of the war in the Pacific. We were sitting out in the yard on an August day. All of the mill whistles and sirens went off. For some reason, that stuck in my mind.

Q: How about school? Lets talk about elementary school first.

TOMSETH: It was in Springfield, Oregon, a public school, District 19. At that time, Springfield grew fairly rapidly at the end of the war. It was a lumber economy. It was about 3,000 people in 1940 and 10,000 in 1950 and 20,000 in 1960.

Q: The building boom, particularly after the war, the end of the Depression. Everybody wanted to have houses.

TOMSETH: That is exactly right. It was a pretty good time for the lumber industry.

Q: Were there any particular courses or anything that you recall at the elementary level?

TOMSETH: No, not really, but I was always interested in and fairly good at math and science. I suppose the courses I had through elementary, junior high school, and high school, the ones that stand out and the teachers who taught them that stand out in my mind were science and mathematics courses, not history, social studies, or things like that.

Q: High school. What high school did you go to?

TOMSETH: Springfield High School, the only one at that time. You sort of grow up in an environment like that knowing everyone from the first grade and you go all through school with them.

Q: What activities were you involved in?

TOMSETH: Well, I loved to play basketball. I wasn't all that good at it, but I worked at it. I played some other sports, such as football and baseball. I also played in the band.

Q: What instrument did you play?

TOMSETH: I played trumpet and baritone. The keying is the same even though they're in different registers.

Q: What about summer jobs?

TOMSETH: At that time, what most kids (This was in the age before McDonald's, Wendy's, and all that.) did before they were 16 was work picking things in agriculture: cherries, strawberries, green beans... After 16, you could also work at things like canneries (There were a couple of canneries there.), picking peaches, apples, that sort of thing. But in high school, I got a part time job with a car dealership washing cars. That was after school and on weekends.

Q: Were you continuing in your math and science courses? Did this continue to be your interest?

TOMSETH: Yes. In high school, my focus was very much on math and science. I liked history and what went by the rubric of social studies (I don't know what they call it these days.). Maybe the teachers weren't as good. Maybe the material wasn't as compelling. I don't know. But math and science is what really grabbed me at that point.

Q: You were at the University of Oregon, which was right around the corner, wasn't it?

TOMSETH: Two miles away from the house I grew up in, right across the bridge.

Q: You were there from when to when?

TOMSETH: I started in 1959 as a math and science major. During the course of that year, I discovered I hated analytical geometry and I hated organic chemistry. I think it had something to do with the temperature in the rooms during the winter months. At the end of the year, I had a 1.4 GPA (grade point average). I had stopped going to class. I quit and went to work in the woods for a year.

Q: When you say you went to work in the woods, what were you doing?

TOMSETH: Logging. In the course of a year, I discovered I hated logging and went back to the University in 1961. I wound up as a history major.

Q: I was a history major. One tries out these other things.

TOMSETH: For me, it was a process of elimination.

Q: So you were there from 1961 to when?

TOMSETH: I nearly caught up in my class. I graduated in December of 1963.

Q: Was there any particular area of history?

TOMSETH: Yes. There were two: modern Japanese history and American history.

Q: This was before the great trade business with the Far East, particularly with Japan. Did the Orient intrude at all into Eugene?

TOMSETH: I wound up doing that mainly because a friend had taken the basic survey course in Japanese history and said that the professor who taught it was extremely good. I had a history requirement that had to satisfy outside the American history focus that I had. I said, "Why not? I'll give it a try?" It turned out this guy really was good. I was very interested in the history, as it turned out.

As for the university itself, I am not sure how this came about, but there was a very good museum of northeastern oriental art there. Much of the collection was given to the university by an alumnus, but what his connection with the Far East was, I don't know.

Q: What about the student body? Was this pretty much white?

TOMSETH: There were some foreign students there, though not a lot. There were some East Asian, some South Asians (Indians for the most part) and some Africans, but not a huge number. This was basically a Wonder Bread kind of university at that time, overwhelmingly white. About half of the student body was actually from California. The ratio of males to females was more than two to one at that time.

Q: More males?

TOMSETH: Yes. A lot of the women there were there basically to find a husband, so you had a relatively low percentage of female students graduating.

Q: What about activities there?

TOMSETH: Well, I played a little bit of intramural sports, but other than that, I was basically hanging out with friends.

Q: No band?

TOMSETH: No, I had given that up.

Q: One of your colleagues who later became a consular officer in various parts of Thailand has been interviewed by me.

TOMSETH: Interestingly enough, when I was in Thailand the first time in Udorn, there was a staff officer who was married to a Japanese, a guy named Bob Charlton. He had graduated from Springfield High School 10 years before me.

Q: As a history major, were you thinking about what you would do afterwards?

TOMSETH: At that time, to the extent that I really focused on what comes after college, it was centered around the idea that I was going to get out of Springfield/Eugene, Oregon. I thought a little bit about law school, but not really very seriously. I really didn't have a very good idea of what I was going to do, quite frankly.

Q: But it was to get the hell out of...

TOMSETH: Yes. I had been born and grew up there. I had hardly been out of the state. I had been to California once and Washington state a couple of times.

Q: What happened? First, did the Kennedy administration when they came in in 1961... A lot of people of your generation who were in educational institutions were touched by the vigor and the emphasis on youth and all. Did that get to you at all?

TOMSETH: Well, I'll tell you what happened. It was one of these fortuitous things. It was a nice spring day in 1963, a friend of mine told me he was going that afternoon to hear a presentation on the Peace Crops and would I like to go along with him? I said, "I don't have a class this afternoon. Sure, I'll go with you." He wound up going to law school; I wound up going to Nepal.

Q: Did you see the Peace Corps as a way of getting out of the Eugene/Springfield circuit?

TOMSETH: That was part of it. The idea of doing something useful appealed to me. It did. I was taken with that notion.

Q: Was that idea floating around the campus? "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

TOMSETH: Yes, it was floating around. I wouldn't want to make too much of it though. This was not a campus that was overwhelmed by this idea of marching off to far flung frontiers for your country. But there were people who were interested in it.

Q: Tell me about the process of getting into the Peace Corps at that time.

TOMSETH: I sent in an application and got back a bunch of materials to fill out. On one of the forms, they asked you if there was any particular country or area where you would like to go. I was sort of bemused by that because my view was, no, anywhere is good. You tell me. I filled all that stuff out and sent it off. A few weeks later, they came back and said, "Would you be interested in going to Nepal?" By that point, it was the summer of 1963 and as luck would have it, there was a Peace Corps group headed for Nepal actually training at the University of Oregon. One member of that class, incidentally, was Peter Burleigh. Harry Barnes, whom you may know, was scheduled to be DCM in Kathmandu. He trained with them. I didn't meet any of those people until I wound up in Nepal. He trained with them to learn Nepali. He was very good at languages.

Q: You graduated in December of 1963. Did you go right into the Peace Corps?

TOMSETH: There was about a month or so gap. But in February, I came here. The first part of the training was at George Washington University.

Q: How did your parents feel about this?

TOMSETH: Well, they were supportive. I think my mother was a little concerned about me going off to the other side of the world. I will tell you a story that is sort of emblematic of the geographical knowledge of people in Eugene and Springfield at that point. When I started telling people I was going to Nepal, it almost invariably evoked reaction of utter bewilderment. Nepal? Where is Nepal? Finally, one person said, "Oh, yes, Nepal. That is south of Rome."

Q: So you came during 1964 to George Washington. What sort of training did you get?

TOMSETH: This was the early days of the program. In many respects, I suppose it was kind of slapdash. The language training portion of it, for example, there was no text. There had been two groups prior to the one that I was in. They were developing a text as they went along, but even at that point, this was mimeographed sheets that they sort of passed out to people, not anything that was very highly structured. People that they brought iit was sort of a mixed bag. You could tell they were kind of scrambling to figure out what do you need to impart to these people who are about to go off to a fairly exotic country. For me, it was all so new that I found it kept my attention. Even things that I subsequently realized were not terribly relevant or even in cases where the people who were brought in were not particularly good communicators, any scrap of information I could get or anything that I thought was going to be at all useful was very welcome. The sense of collegiality, the sort of comradeship that developed among the 40 odd people in this group when we started out... There was very strong bonding among people in the group from the very beginning.

Q: I think that has continued. The Peace Crops alumni are legion in post.

TOMSETH: Some of these people remain some of my best friends. Certainly the Peace Corps experience was for me the most important experience in my life.

Q: How did you find Washington, DC as opposed to Washington state?

TOMSETH: Well, I had hardly ever been out of the Northwest, you know. I flew in here on a February day and it started snowing immediately afterwards. That first weekend, they took us out and around. We went down to Mount Vernon. There was still snow on the ground, but the thing that struck me was how dead everything looked. In western Oregon in the winter, it's very green. There are some deciduous trees, but most of them are evergreens. The grass is green. Here the grass was brown. There was not a leaf on any tree. You would see this red soil. I thought it was really a pretty God forsaken place. We wound up at the Lincoln Memorial. The snow had melted around it and the grass was green. We got out of the bus and I inspected a little more closely. It turned out they had painted it. The cigarette butts were green, too. That was a real downer.

But then the spring came while we werhere. I thought that was one of the most gorgeous things I had ever seen in my life.

Q: You learn to appreciate a Washington spring, which we're going through right now. It is magnificent.

On the training, were you all going to be teaching English or were you going to be teaching various things?

TOMSETH: No. There were three different subgroups. One, six people had either forestry degrees or some experience in forestry. I was a little surprised that I didn't wind up...

Q: I was going to say, my god, you chopped down trees.

TOMSETH: I didn't chop them down. I tied the cables around them when they were dragged off to the loading landing. But I had worked in that and lived in it my entire life. All of my family were involved in it in one way or another.

Another group were community developers. Some of those people had engineering backgrounds.

Then the third group were teachers, mostly English. I wound up in a boys' high school teaching some English, but a lot of science and math, too, because I had that background.

Q: Was it a group that was all going to Nepal?

TOMSETH: They were all going to Nepal.

Q: Did you run across other groups who were going to other places?

TOMSETH: We did the last few weeks of the training program out in Hawaii. As we were cycling into the center in Hilo, there was a group leaving, but it was literally as we were getting off the bus, they were getting on.

Q: So, in many ways, you weren't part of the whole Peace Corps. You were the Nepalese...

TOMSETH: Nepal III, which had a very strong group country identification.

Q: How about the people who instructed you? Had they been to Nepal? Did they know what they were talking abut?

TOMSETH: The language teachers were Nepalese, of course. Several of the people had some kind of experience. The linguist who ran the program had done some field work in Nepal.

Q: Was there an effort at that time to make sure you steered clear of the embassy, to make sure that you weren't tainted with being official Americans?

TOMSETH: Well, I recall there was some discussion of how the Peace Corps related to the rest of the U.S. government and an emphasis that, while it is a U.S. government agency, Peace Corps volunteers are not U.S. government employees in the usual sense of the word. But this was really before Vietnam, so there wasn't as much emphasis put on that as I think there was two or three years later as Vietnam became a very hot political issue.

Q: When did you go to Nepal?

TOMSETH: We got there in May of 1964.

Q: And when did you leave Nepal?

TOMSETH: Christmas Eve 1965.

Q: How did Nepal strike you when you arrived in May of 1964?

TOMSETH: The trip out was an experience in itself. This was on the old PanAm One around the world. It stopped everywhere. We left in Hawaii and stopped in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Rangoon, and wound up in Calcutta. The thing I remember most about that was, everyplace we stopped at that place, it got hotter and more and more humid. Finally, in Calcutta, at about three or four o'clock in the morning, it must have been close to 100 degrees. The humidity was at least that high. We hung around there until the sun came up because the airfield in Kathmandu had no capability of landing by other than a visual approach.

We had only seen airports en route, but when we got into Kathmandu, it was like going literally into a different world in terms of anything I had ever seen. We were there for a couple of days and then sort of scattered. About 10 of us were going to the eastern part of Nepal to various places, so we were flown down to a town called Rotniger, which is right on the Indian border. We got on a little truck. There was a road that went about 25 miles into Nepal to Dharan, which is where I wound up being. I was literally just sort of dumped off there and the others were told to start walking to these villages that they were going to. The Peace Corps echoes of the time was that it should be slapdash, you should just throw people out there and let them sink or swim. The Peace Corps doesn't operate in its training program or selection process or anything they do like that anymore, much to the better, as far as I am concerned. I think the organization is far more professional these days than it was 35 years ago. So, there we were in this little town that was hotter than Hell. We had a bit of language, but we were barely functional and sort of had to figure this out. There were three of us there together. One fellow taught in college and another guy high school. We had each other to rely upon, but it was really sort of "figure it out for yourselves." It was kind of a tough first couple of months. I complicated it by getting bacillary dysentery, really getting very sick right at the outset. But we all survived and figured out what it was we thought we were going to do.

Q: It does sound like people were just sort of thrown in on their own. Had somebody had this village or town and said, "You guys are going to be teaching here or there?"

TOMSETH: Well, we were told where we were going and given the names of people that we should go find. At that particular point, it was the school break, so we had about two or three weeks before we really had to start teaching, which wasn't bad in one sense. It allowed us to focus on acclimatizing ourselves to this place without having to worry about doing a job. We went and looked up these people that we were supposed to report to. They were expecting us. We had a place to live. The school actually provided a little house that all three of us lived in.

Q: What about language?

TOMSETH: We had had this training in Washington and Hawaii, so all of us to one degree or another could function a bit. I suppose of the three of us, I was the more fluent, but I was hardly at a level that I really felt comfortable. This was true of people in the two groups that got there before us, our group, and ones that came after. Some people took that basis and built on it. Others didn't. They just in a linguistic sense retreated into a cocoon and did what they had to do, but nothing more than that. I subsequently saw that in spades in the Foreign Service, too. But some people became very good. I was moderately skilled with the language by the time I left, but I learned something other than that, which was how to study. I applied that in subsequent language training in the Foreign Service, so I did better the second time around than the first time.

Q: What about the language training that you were doing with the students? How did that work?

TOMSETH: The school situation was a great disappointment. Growing up I had heard about Asian students and their diligence and tremendous desire to learn. Dharan was the largest town in that area. It was a boys' high school. The students there tended to be the children of upper caste people in that town and from the surrounding area. They weren't the least bit interested in studying. Their caste determined what they were going to be in life, not their education. Discipline was bad. The classes were terribly crowded. There were at least 50 children in each class. Attendance was spotty. The school year, the number of hours that were actually scheduled in the year, was very minimal. So, just teaching in the school was not a very satisfying experience. What the other fellow and I wound up doing was finding a few students who were interested in actually learning something and tutoring them outside of regular school hours. You got your satisfaction as a teacher from what you could do for the small number of students who had some interest in education. The school system, too, contributed to the phenomenon that was so disappointing. A lot of the teachers in the school were actually Indians and they were paid so little that they couldn't possibly survive on their salary. So, they were not interested in doing anything in class. They made their money giving what they called "tushin," after "tuition," after classes that the students' families paid them for. But it wasn't teaching for knowledge. It was teaching to prepare for the examination.

Q: What sort of examination were they moving towards?

TOMSETH: This was sort of a copy of the British system passed through an Indian sieve, if you will, and about 50 years out of date. Whether you moved on to the next class, whether you went from high school into a college, depended on that examination. There was tremendous cheating with a lot of collusion on the part of the teachers and the school. It was all sort of rote memory. It was "What quotation from Blake am I going to have to know for the test? Who is Blake? I don't care." But you knew there was going to be some line that you would have to have for the test.

Q: Had the Peace Corps people before you prepared you for this?

TOMSETH: No. The information that we had gotten in the training was largely from these Nepalese language teachers. They themselves had bought the myth of this burning desire of Asian students to learn.

Q: My background is essentially that of a consular officel've watched cultural clashes when your consular officer is up against people who want to get a visa and don't give a damn how they get it. Did you find this of your other colleagues and with yourself, learning to roll with the punches or getting annoyed? How did this work?

TOMSETH: In the school, I think, my colleague and I both made our peace with the system, but the initial reaction to student apathy and corruption in the faculty was outrage and "What can we do to change this" and "By God, we're going to run our classes differently." But over time, we both realized that the system was certainly stronger than we were individually or even collectively. We went through the motions in the school. We showed up every day and taught our classes as seriously as we could, but realized that hardly anyone was paying attention and what they were really interested in was getting their "tution" from these Indian faculty members so they could pass the exam. When we proctored the exams, if the cheating was blatant, we would confiscate the notes and things like that. But in the end, we didn't worry about it too much and focused on those few students who seemed to have a genuine desire to actually get an education.

Q: How about with the school authorities and then the government authorities that you ran across? I would think the Indians, for example, would be kind of annoyed at you since you were breaking their race war, so to speak.

TOMSETH: Well, they were. We didn't realize that at the very beginning, but yes, the attitude that we brought to it was very threatening. Their reaction to it was negative. After we had gotten things figured out and learned to roll with the flow, we actually established some fairly good friendships with some of these people. They weren't bad people. They were trying to live.

Q: No. I mean, this is one of the things... Particularly in Asia, you do find that you paid for services rendered rather than just getting public servants to do things for you.

TOMSETH: The headmaster of that school, who was an Indian but subsequently became a Nepali citizen, actually wound up years later as a minister of education.

Q: In the town where you were, what did they do?

TOMSETH: It was a trading town. Right a little bit up out of the Try, the malarial jungle area that runs along the foot of the Himalayas, although there is not much of them left (It has all been cut down for firewood or lumber.), at that time, there was still a 15 20 mile belt. Dharan sat just above that on a big alluvial fan coming out of the first ridge of the Himalayan foothills. There was a road from the border up to the town, so a lot of Indian goods came out by truck to that town, were unloaded, and put on the backs of porters to pack into the eastern third of Nepal. So the ethnic mix there was very interesting. You had some of these hill people, who were the porters. You had some upper caste Nepalis who ran businesses. There were these Gangetic Plain very low caste farm people who would come up to trade their goods. There was a group that was actually originally from Rajasthan in western India, Mahwaris, who were traders. They were all over India and even further abroad. There are more Mahwaris in this country. They were very shrewd traders.

Q: Did the central government run at all where you were?

TOMSETH: Oh, yes. Dharan was not the capital of the district. That was a little town that as the crow flies was not that far away, but it took you the better part of a day to get there. This was the district headquarters. So, we didn't have district officials there, but there were other kinds of officials.

Q: Were there still reverberations from the China India war?

TOMSETH: Not felt so much in that part of Nepal. But at that time, the Indians in the late 1950s had built a road up from the Indian border to Kathmandu. At that time, the Chinese were working on a road from the Tibetan border down to Kathmandu. We heard a lot from our Indian colleagues in the school about what a terrible security threat it was going to be when this road was completed because the Chinese could come pouring down the road from Tibet right into the plains of India. It had only been two years since the war.

Q: How were Americans received? How were you all received?

TOMSETH: Oh, very positively. Most Nepalis... Literacy at that point was probably under five percent on a national basis, so the vast majority of people had no idea where the United States was. But again, in the school, our faculty colleagues and even students had a general idea. The town had no electricity, but there were two movie theaters that had generators there to operate on. Most of the fair was Indian films, but there would be things from time to time that gave people a glimpse of what the United States was. There had been a Peace Corps volunteer in this town from the first group, so at the high school, they already knew an American.

Q: What was social life during this time?

TOMSETH: Well, I learned to play chess. Again, some of the faculty members at the school were very avid and pretty good chess players, so we spent a lot of time drinking tea and playing chess with our teaching colleagues and some other people that we got to know in the town. Just out of boredom I would go to these Hindi movies to the point where I (Nepali and Hindi are fairly closely related.) in fairly short order could follow. It helps that there is only one plot in Bombay. It doesn't matter what movie you're watching. You know what the plot is.

Q: Did you have any contact with your colleagues who had been told to hike up into the...

TOMSETH: I was going to say, that was the other thing. There was a lot of visiting. Because anybody in the eastern third of Nepal to get anywhere else had to come through Dharan, we saw a lot of people coming and going. The nearest location where we could go visit somebody was about a day and a half walk, so that wasn't bad.

Q: Were you living the high sophisticated life compared to them?

TOMSETH: In some senses. In Dharan, because it was a market town, meat was available every day. In some of these villages in the hills, they might not see meat more than every three to six weeks. Some people when they saw how these animals lived and foraged for food actually became vegetarians. You can tell me all you want about how that is processed in the body. I know what it was before it was ingested.

Q: You left there at the end of 1965. What about the students that you tutored? How were they coming along?

TOMSETH: Fairly well. In that time, there were a couple of them who had finished high school and had passed the exam to go on to college. They had a national university system with colleges scattered around the country. A couple of them had entered college in Dharan itself. There were other students at the school, thanks to the tutoring on how to pass the exam, that did, too. But I didn't really find out how well some of the students did until I went back to Nepal. When I left, I said, "I'll wait 10 years. If it's any less than that, I won't be able to tell if anything has moved." Some of these students, including ones we had had, but students that other Peace Corps volunteers had taught as well, had risen to middle echelons of the Nepali government and were actually making an impact on policy. That was very encouraging.

The discouraging thing was that it was hard to see how policy was really going to have an effective impact on some of the development issues that they confronted: deforestation, environmental degradation, and population growth. This was the early 1980s when I went back. Then I was back several times over the next 16 years. It was heartening to see these people who cared and actually had some ability, but disheartening to understand the magnitude of the problems that they were trying to deal with.

Q: Nepal had a king, a royal family. How were they looked upon out in the hinterlands?

TOMSETH: When I was there, just a couple of years before that, there had been a Westminster style parliamentary government in place. The king had done away with that and had instituted a system of direct rule. That corner of southeastern Nepal was a real communist hotbed, so there was a lot of unhappiness with the political system that the king had instituted in that area of the country, at least among the educated elite. That system continued until just a few years ago when they again came back to the Westminister style parliamentary system that had existed from the early 1950s until the early 1960s. But for most people, the vast majority of the population, they might know that there was something called the king, but it didn't really impact on their lives in any meaningful way. What they were grappling with was just basic subsistence. There was an AID guy there who had come up from New Delhi in 1959 when the embassy was opened up and the AID mission was established. He had been there about five years when I got there. Maybe he was a little jaded. I remember one time he wagged his finger in front of my face and said, "Young man, what you have to understand is that in the 1950s, Nepal rushed headlong into the 13th century." That was about right. In most areas of Nepal, it was really very basic subsistence agriculture in a very poor environment for agriculture.

Q: Did you feel at that time where you were that the Indian rift ran strong? Were the Indians running things?

TOMSETH: Not running things, but they had a great deal of influence. This school I taught in was a very good example. There simply were very few Nepalis who had sufficient education to teach in a high school. The only way to have a high school was to recruit these people from India to teach. You saw that in other ministries as well. It wasn't just education. There were a lot of Indians who had been brought in, often in fairly senior positions, simply because there were no Nepalis qualified to hold those positions. Again, when I went back after those 17 years, a lot of that had changed. Some of the Indians, like our old headmaster, had become Nepali citizens. But in part through a Peace Crops contribution, there had been a generation of people who had been given a reasonably decent education so that there were many more people who were qualified to do these basic kinds of things that have to be done in a developing society.

Q: By the way, what was the subject matter that you were teaching? Was it pretty basic? English as a language as opposed to English as a literature?

TOMSETH: What the students wanted was "What quotation from Blake do I need to know to pass the examination?" What we wanted to try to do was to give them some understanding of English as a language. What is the grammar? What do you need to know so that you can teach yourself more so you won't be dependent upon a teacher telling you what you will have to regurgitate that you will actually be able to use this as a tool. There wasn't a whole lot of interest in that on that part of most students. They wanted to know "What do I need to know to pass the examination?" And math and science. That was actually more satisfying. The rules are clear. You cannot do geometry unless you know what the rules are.

Q: Did you find on the math and science side that there was more substance in what you were teaching?

TOMSETH: Yes. Basically, what we were teaching were rules of mathematics. Even the students who weren't serious about learning understood that this would be useful for the examination. Those classes for me were much more satisfying than the English classes.

Q: When you left at the end of 1965, did you know what you wanted to do, whither and all that?

TOMSETH: It was getting a little bit clearer. I knew I did not want to be a teacher. That was the process of elimination. But I knew I liked history, so I went back to graduate school in Indian history at the University of Michigan. I had while I was in Nepal, as a number of Peace Corps volunteers had done, been encouraged by John Stebbins, who was the ambassador, and Harry Barnes, and others in the embassy, "If you think you might be interested in a career in foreign affairs, take the Foreign Service Examination." That was the first time I even realized there was a Foreign Service. I tell people that prior to that my idea of foreign service was finding a job in California.

Q: How did you have contact with the embassy at that point?

TOMSETH: Stebbins and Harry both were people who were very interested in what was going on in the [hinterland]. They spent a lot of time trekking about the country. So, we met them both several times in Dharan. Whenever people went up to Kathmandu, people in the embassy, including Harry particularly, would invite them in to his house for lunch or dinner. So, we were proselytized. Five of my group wound up going to work for AID directly out of the Peace Corps. A number of us took the written examination. So, I had taken that and passed it when I had left Nepal in December. When I got to Ann Arbor, I went into Detroit and took the oral, not really thinking that this was something that I knew I wanted to do, but it was an option, so let's keep it open. But at that point I was more focused on the idea that I was going to do a PH.D. in South Asian history.

But this was early 1966 and they were calling 30,000 a month and I got a draft notice very shortly after I arrived. This disrupted my graduate studies plans. Wayne Morris was the senior senator from Oregon. Through his office, I found out that there was a provision in the Selective Service Act that said, "You are entitled to a student deferment for the academic year in which you are enrolled if you are given a draft notice." Michigan was on a trimester system. They go year-round. I started in January, so that meant they had to give me two trimesters through the end of August. They gave you six hours of credit if you could pass a language examination, so I took it in French and passed. I got six hours credit for that. In two semesters, I was able to get enough additional hours that I actually finished a master's degree. But when I got this draft notice, I did several things. I got in touch with every military service to see about OCS programs. I got in touch with the Foreign Service to see if there was any possibility of getting into a class sometime around the end of August, still thinking that I would wind up in military service, but if at least I completed the process, I wouldn't lose the time that I had put in on it, it would continue to be an option when I finished military service. Maybe for the only time in history, the State Department actually moved faster than the military service. They said, "Yes, we have a class starting in the middle of August. We will put you into that, if you like." I said, "Yes, do that." I made arrangements to take my exams early and came down to Washington in the middle of August, got sworn in, and told Personnel what my situation was with the draft. They said, "Well, now that you're a Foreign Service officer, you can ask for an occupational deferment. You can have your request transferred from your local board in Oregon to the one in Washington, DC." I said, "It sounds like a good idea to me." I did that. It took them about nine months to do it, but in the meantime, I was launched into the Foreign Service.

Q: Do you remember anything about the Foreign Service oral exam?

TOMSETH: Yes, one thing in particular. After I had been in Dharan for about a year, one of the two people in my group (He was in the university.) was moved to another branch of the university in a different town. So, they put a new (I think he was in the fifth group.) person into that position. He moved in with the other person. He had a very hard time with Afghanistan. He kept calling it "Afghafistan." I used to rag him mercilessly about this. I don't know what it was. It was just some mental block he had. In any event, in the course of the oral examination, the subject of Afghanistan came up and I said, "Afghafistan." That was his revenge! That is the only thing I remember from that examination: that "Afghafistan" question.

Q: When you were going towards your Ph.D., why Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan?

TOMSETH: Basically two reasons. They had a South Asian program and not a whole lot of universities did. But the more important factor was, they did not require the Graduate Records Examination (GRE), which I had not taken before coming to Nepal and I could not take while I was there. These days, I think you can. You can probably take it in Kathmandu, but then you could not. They had something called the Miller Analogy Exam, which they would mail out to you. There was no time limit on the thing. You could take it and send it back into them. So, I did the Miller Analogy Exam for entrance to graduate school there.

Q: While you were sampling the academic side of South Asia, did you find that the course was weighted towards India or towards Pakistan?

TOMSETH: India. Most of the faculty members at Ann Arbor at that time in South Asia were India specialists in one area or another.

Q: There wasn't really much of a Pakistani specialty, was there?

TOMSETH: Well, Columbia University had over the years people who are more focused on Pakistan than some of the others out there. But California and Wisconsin were heavily weighted towards India.

Q: You were at the University of Michigan in 1966.

TOMSETH: Yes, the first half of 1966.

Q: Was there much of a feeling about Vietnam at that time?

TOMSETH: Oh, you bet there was. "The New York Times Sunday Magazine" actually came to Ann Arbor to do a feature on the student deferent/Vietnam War phenomenon. I think the very first teach in was at Ann Arbor before I got there in 1965. Because I had gotten this draft notice and the graduate school knew about it because I had been talking to them about how I could finish this MA program at least in the very short time I have allotted to me, they sent the team to interview me as part of their article. Yes, there was a very active anti war movement at Michigan and a lot of strong feeling about the draft and that sort of thing.

Q: You came in in which Foreign Service class?

TOMSETH: August 18, 1966.

Q: Could you characterize the class? There were about how many?

TOMSETH: It was a fairly big one. Counting the USIA people, we had 60 people in the class. That year, they took quite a few people. I think State Department intake that year was 250. There was only one other former Peace Corps volunteer in that group. About half of the people had graduate degrees. There was one guy who had gone into the Air Force right out of high school and had been in the Air Force for six years. He had come out and had started to school, but had only finished one year of school, which was a little bit unusual. There were six people who were going in as staff officers, but who were part of the A-100 process. For me, there was a fair quotient of Ivy League eastern private school, Georgetown (There were several people from the Georgetown School of Foreign Service.) in the group. There were several lawyers. But some people were sort of like me, came from the wrong side of the country, were from very ordinary social class backgrounds. Everybody was looking around the room and trying to size up who was going to be ambassador in this group. In our class, there was one that everybody would have agreed was bound to make it. That was Jerry Bremer. And he did.

Q: What about minorities and women?

TOMSETH: There was one black woman, who was one of the six staff officers, and that was it. There were about 10 women altogether, a couple of whom got married in fairly short order and left. One married a Foreign Service colleague, but in those days, you had to turn in your resignation.

Q: Did you have any feeling about Vietnam? Was this a refuge from Vietnam or were these people ready to go to wherever?

TOMSETH: I don't recall anybody who was openly trying to get out of going to Vietnam by coming into the Foreign Service. There were several people who were actually interested in going to Vietnam and a number who were prepared to go to Vietnam, including myself. In the assignment process, when I was interviewed and asked where I would like to go, I said, "The only place outside of Northwestern United States, maybe a little bit of Washington, DC, and Ann Arbor, Michigan that I know anything about is South Asia. I just finished a graduate degree in South Asian history. Of course I would like to go to South Asia." The State Department assignment policy at that point was not to send former Peace Corps volunteers back to the areas from whence they had just recently come, a policy long since trashcanned, for the better, I think. So, I was asked, "Where else would you like to go?" I said, "Well, while I was in Nepal, I did make a trip to Southeast Asia. A friend and I went to Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore. I guess I wouldn't mind going back to Southeast Asia. That includes Vietnam," thinking I had just bought myself a ticket. But as it turned out, no one from my class was initially assigned to Vietnam.

Q: That's odd.

TOMSETH: It is odd. In the very next class, I think they had about six who went. Within a year, everybody was going to Vietnam. The only way to get in was to commit to go to Vietnam. Then several people from my class ultimately wound up in Vietnam on subsequent assignments.

Q: Where were you assigned then?

TOMSETH: Thailand.

Q: This was still 1966?

TOMSETH: The assignment was made in 1966. There was a two week consular course. Then I had 24 weeks of Thai training.

Q: You took Thai training through to 1967. You were in Thailand from when to when?

TOMSETH: I got there May 1, 1967 and was there until the end of June of 1971.

Q: How did you find Thai training?

TOMSETH: Well, having been through learning Nepali, which was very different than learning college French, with the emphasis on speaking, I had learned a couple of things. One was the value of actually being able to speak the language. I had also learned how to study in this kind of a language program. So, I worked at it very hard and got a very good result.

Q: Had you gotten married or anything like this?

TOMSETH: No, I was single at that point.

Q: When you arrived in Thailand in 1967, how did it strike you as a country?

TOMSETH: Well, I had been there. I had spent about a week there on this trip. The way the mission dealt with junior officers at that particular point was over a period of probably 10 years or more, they got one junior officer a year. They had a rotation program. They put the officer in Chiang Mai, where we had a consulate, for the first year and then moved the person down to Bangkok for the second year. So, I went to Chiang Mai. I had not been in northern Thailand. In many respects, it was sort of an ideal first assignment in a great place with great people and an interesting political environment. Even though it was a consulate, the only consular work they did was renew an occasional American passport. They didn't issue any visas. That was all done in Bangkok.

Because I had worked with this language, when I got to Chiang Mai, unlike getting to Dharan, I could actually function. I wasn't prepared to give speeches yet, but I could talk to anybody about most common kinds of things. They understood me and I understood them. We had four State Department Americans in the consulate: the principal officer, another second tour junior officer, myself, and a staff officer who was the administrative person.

Q: Who was the principal officer?

TOMSETH: Well, there was a guy named Carl Nelson who was in the position when I got there, but he was not there. He had gone on home leave and while he was there, one of their children had a serious medical problem that meant he could not go back. So, he and Weaver Gimm, who was then on the desk in the Department, switched places and Weaver came out in about July. He promptly sold my position to the embassy in Bangkok for a couple of additional FSN positions. So, I didn't do a year in Chiang Mai. I only did five months and then was moved down to Bangkok.

Q: What was the situation in Chiang Mai that we were particularly interested in?

TOMSETH: The big issue then was what is going on in northern Burma with the KMT remnants and various ethnic minority

Q: Red flag.

TOMSETH: Yes, exactly. A little bit of interest in the narcotics issue. This was pre DEA, but there was a federal agency that had an acronym of four letters (I've forgotten what it was.). But they didn't have anybody there. They had a car and left it there. Somebody would come up from Bangkok every six weeks or so just to check on what was happening on the opium front. But there was not the kind of interest in narcotics that subsequently developed not only in the Golden Triangle, but worldwide.

Q: Was there any communist insurgency going on in that part of Thailand?

TOMSETH: Not in northern Thailand at that time. Within the previous couple of years, an open insurgency had emerged in northeastern Thailand, but not in the north at the time I was there. Subsequently, it did.

Q: How did we check on Burma?

TOMSETH: The Agency had a big operation there and there was and still is a listening operation there. They ran [agents] in and out and had various rather nefarious people on their payroll.

Q: What about the social life there in Chiang Mai?

TOMSETH: There was a small American community that, frankly, I wasn't all that interested in. There were a few old missionary types who had a lot of lore. I liked picking their brains, but the American community cocktail and dinner circuit I didn't find terribly interesting. I bought myself a motorcycle and rode all over the place and spent as much time as I could getting to know Thai. A university had been built there. They literally built it from scratch on a brand new campus. They hadn't graduated a class yet when I got there in 1967. I made a point of trying to get to know as many of the university faculty people as I could, a lot of whom were really quite young. They were my contemporaries. So, I got to know a lot of them.

There was a big Thai medical community there. The American missionaries had started a hospital and there was a hospital associated with the university, so I got to know quite a few of the doctors.

Q: What was your impression of the Thais as opposed to the Nepalese?

TOMSETH: I guess the most obvious difference was, it even then was a much better educated society. Literacy in Thailand in the mid 1960s was well over 70%. In Chiang Mai, there was really a kind of community you couldn't find in Nepal at all: people who had university educations and who had traveled abroad. It was a developing country, to be sure, but not in the 13th century. This was a very different kind of place.

The Nepalis, particulary in the hills of Nepal, are very open and you can go up to a door of somebody's house and knock on it and ask them if you can stay there. If they are not high caste, they will actually let you stay inside rather than sleep on the porch. So, they are friendly enough. In that sense, they were a lot like the Thais. Well, I'm prejudiced. I eventually wound up marrying a Thai. They are just very friendly people. If you make an effort to speak their language, they will clutch you to their breast.

Q: Then you went to Bangkok when?

TOMSETH: At the end of September 1967. The embassy at that point had a separate Political Military Section. We had nearly 50,000 troops in Thailand, most of them Air Force. In the summer of 1967, it occurred to somebody that it would be a good idea with that many U.S. forces in Thailand to have a Status of Forces Agreement. So, we were in the midst of trying to negotiate one. I was assigned in the Political Military Section with a couple of people. One was an Air Force officer, a lawyer, and another FSO to this SOFA negotiation effort. We did that until about the end of the year, at which point the negotiations became hopelessly deadlocked and by mutual agreement we said, "Well, we brought all these people in and we've been operating for a couple of years now without a SOFA. Why do we need one? Let's just do it ad hoc," which is very much the Thai way of doing things. Americans really aren't adverse either. We like to do things ad hoc. So, thereafter, we had no more negotiations. The Air Force judge advocate type and I spent the next five months sort of ambulance chasing or police car chasing. Wherever there was an incident, he and I would go. He was the legal expert and I was the language interface.

Q: I am told that as you got started on these potential negotiations, dealing with the country is a piece of cake. The real problem is dealing with the Pentagon lawyers. Did you find this?

TOMSETH: This Air Force officer was a great guy and the soul of reason. But at that point, and it may be less strong today, there was some well entrenched legal doctrine when it came to SOFAs, one of which had to do with who exercises criminal jurisdiction. The model was NATO and the bilateral agreements with Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. There, the U.S. had the right of first refusal. The U.S. would exercise jurisdiction in all criminal cases unless, for its own good reasons, Uncle Sam chose to waive that privilege. That was something the Thais simply could not accept. It hadn't been that many decades since they had gotten rid of all the extraterritoriality treaties with Woodrow Wilson's son in law being the principal advisor. So, here were the Americans back saying, "You've got to give it back to us."

Q: What sort of problems were showing up? You saw ambulance chasing.

TOMSETH: Mostly police traffic accidents. We had built a port in Sedaheep on the [coast of] Thailand and from there, a road up to Korat in northwestern Thailand. We were shipping in all the ordinance that the Air Force was dropping in Laos and Vietnam through that port and trucking it up to Korat. These guys would have accidents.

Q: How were they settled?

TOMSETH: However we could. The basic way was, if you could get it at the police level, that was best. We worked a deal with the police whereby the military would pay some kind of compensation to whoever was injured or killed in the accident in exchange for dropping any kind of criminal or civil charges that might otherwise be brought.

Sometimes you didn't get to them until they went to court. The Thai judicial system has no trial by jury. It's done by professional judges. Judges as trained lawyers tend to take the law more seriously than cops do.

Q: Who was your ambassador while you were there?

TOMSETH: Graham Martin was when I first arrived, but he left in the summer of 1967 and Len Unger came to replace him and was there the whole time that I was there.

Q: Were there Graham Martin stories going around?

TOMSETH: Oh, you bet. The one I remember because it subsequently was proven to be totally all wet in terms of Thai society was, Graham Martin divided the staff into two types: those who worked and those who played golf. At that time, golf was not a big game among Thais. There were only a few courses in the country. When I went back the second time in the late 1980s, there were golf courses all over the places. Golf was a very useful thing to do in terms of contacts, particularly with the military.

Q: You were in the Political Military Section. Is this where you stayed the time you were there?

TOMSETH: No. In June of 1968, I was sold into bondage once again. We had opened up a consulate in Udorn in 1965, I think, maybe 1966. Al Francis had arrived in Udorn as principal officer. He had been a junior officer in Thailand and had done the year in Chiang Mai and the year in Bangkok. Al is one of these people who also thinks language is very important. He was a very good Thai speaker and Vietnamese speaker. So, he wanted people on the staff in Udorn who could speak Thai. By that point, I for better or worse had a reputation. He went to Unger and said, "I want him" and got me. So, in June of 1968, I moved up to Udorn and spent the next 10 months or so being a political military officer in northeastern Thailand.

Q: What were you doing up there?

TOMSETH: Two things. One was, because I had worked in the Political Military Section in Bangkok, I was given responsibility for the bases, of which there were four large ones and several small ones in northeastern Thailand, to stay in touch with them, pay attention to what their relations with local communities were, work with their civil action officers and programs that they did out in the villages. They vaccinated a lot of water buffalo and people. I hope they didn't give them the same serum. Things like that.

Secondly, in early 1969, there were parliamentary elections for the first time since 1958. So, we spent a lot of time covering the run up to the elections.

Q: What was your impression of the electoral system in Thailand at that time?

TOMSETH: Well, one important factor in northeastern Thailand and in rural Thailand generally was the poor communications infrastructure. There weren't a lot of roads. Constituencies were entire provinces. Some of these provinces were pretty big. So, the challenge for a candidate, particularly after a more than 10 year hiatus, was how do you get the word out that you are running for office? How do you generate votes? The methods were fairly primitive because of the lack of this communication infrastructure, but in a sense, it was more democratic than this much more sophisticated system that has developed over the years has become in that money didn't count for nearly as much as it does now. You got a lot of former teachers who were elected to that parliament. I think some people who have stayed in politics over the years have been very good politicians in the sense that they pay attention to their constituencies and they are very interested in local development issues. But in terms of the sophistication of the process, it was very primitive compared to what you have in Thailand now where a road goes everywhere, every village is electrified, they all have television sets, there is a lot of media advertising, but money counts for a lot more in this system than it did at that very early stage. It is literally possible to buy a seat, if you're prepared to spend enough money to get it in Thailand. In 1969, I don't think you could have bought a seat.

Q: You say there had been a 10 year hiatus. Had there been a military government?

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: When had that ceased?

TOMSETH: There was a coup in 1957. Thailand has had lots of coups. The military strongman who won out was a guy named Serittonarat, but he did not in 1957 become prime minister, which was the traditional thing to do. He appointed one of his lieutenants, a general named Tunong Kintagajong, who was the commander of the First Army as prime minister. But a year later, Surit took that over himself. He was prime minister from 1958 until he died in 1964. Then Tunong became prime minister once again. But all this time, there was a constituent assembly appointed by the military, supposedly drafting a new constitution. For years, they really didn't do very much, but in late 1967 and early 1968, there was a flurry of activity. They produced this constitution in the fall of 1968. It called for parliamentary elections, but they didn't really give parliament very much power. It still remained with the military to appoint a prime minister and a cabinet. So, this was a parliament that had basically little more than debating powers. They could debate the budget, but they really didn't have any power to affect it in any meaningful way. But even that was too much for the military. They threw parliament out again in 1971. It didn't last very long at all.

Q: Was the CIA actively working in Udorn?

TOMSETH: The CIA was everywhere and still has a huge presence in Thailand, not that they need it anymore, but they are very comfortable there.

Q: I don't want to get into who did what to whom, but at the same time, I find it interesting to look at th(end of tape)

One of the things we try to examine is the role of the CIA as far as how it interfaces with the Department of State. The CIA in some places is almost so powerful that it doesn't interface very much. It goes back to Washington and does its thing and the State Department does its thing. It isn't enmity, but There really isn't a lot of real interchange.

TOMSETH: Well, the presence there in the 1960s was huge. There is a history to this. It goes back to World War II when the OSS worked very closely with an organization called the Free Thai Movement, which was an underground group during the war years when the Japanese were in Thailand. One of the people in the OSS was a military fellow named Bill Donovan, who subsequently was involved in setting up the CIA after the war and then was our ambassador in Bangkok during the mid 1950s. So, from the very beginning, the Agency had a special place in Thailand. From the late 1940s, it had a very close relationship with the Thai military. So, particularly in the 1960s when we were using Thailand as the world's largest aircraft carrier, that relationship between the Agency and the military when there was a military government in Thailand was a very important one. Good ambassadors, and I think we had some good ambassadors in Thailand over the years, recognized what the situation was and did their very best to have as good a relationship as they could with the Agency and the station chief. That was certainly true in Martin's and Unger's day.

Q: What about the war in Vietnam and also in Laos? You were there during a high periothe Tet Offensive, post Tet. Nixon was coming in and all that. How did this impact as you saw it on what was happening in Thailand?

TOMSETH: It was the overwhelming, if not absolutely singular, bilateral issue that we had. The main function of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Thailand in the late 1960s and early 1970s was prosecution of the war in Indochina. That led into other things. That was the reason why we became very much involved in the counterinsurgency program in Thailand itself. That insurgency potentially threatened the ability to use these military facilities in Thailand for prosecution of the war.

Q: It was one of the dominoes, too, wasn't it?

TOMSETH: That was the assumption, although I must say, as a young, inexperienced, naive junior Foreign Service officer arriving in Thailand in 1967 and hearing soon and frequently from experienced hands, many of them Agency people, "If Vietnam and Laos go down, you can bet money that Thailand won't be far behind them," I thought, "I'm not so sure that's true. It just strikes me that Thailand may be a different country than Laos or Vietnam."

Q: There is a tendency in the part of people to extrapolate from one to another, but it certainly was part of our thinking.

TOMSETH: Yes. It was taken largely as an article of faith at that point.

Q: This is one of the reasons why the CIA had such a presence there. It was to do what it could, to observe, and to help prevent, wasn't it? This was an occupational prerogative.

TOMSETH: Yes. There was a program, ostensibly an aid program, Public Safety, and a lot of the staff actually came out of the Agency. The Public Safety Program subsequently got a very bad name for what went on in Vietnam, Brazil, and a number of other places and was done away with in the 1970s. But in Thailand, they were actually doing something that was useful. They were creating a modern police force that actually would be responsive to local security and criminal issues. They weren't 100% successful or effective, but they played a very important role in the Thai development process. You cannot have a developed society without a modern police force. These guys played an important, overall positive, role in bringing that about.

Q: In Udorn, you were there until 1971?

TOMSETH: No.

Q: They bounced you around.

TOMSETH: Well, I was a junior officer. I was supposed to be on a rotational tour, so I was supposed to leave at the end of two years. But again because of the language aspect, when my two years was up, Len Unger said, "I want him for my staff assistant." So, I took home leave and came back and staff aided for Ambassador Unger for 15 months. Then I spent my last year in the Political Section.

Q: What about Len Unger as an ambassador? How did he operate?

TOMSETH: Al Francis had done this job for Kenneth Todd Young. As I was leaving Udorn, he said, "You will find that this is a good job to have done." I think Len's style was probably not the same as Young's, but Al was right. It was a great learning experience. I was frustrated sometimes because Len actually could and did do a lot of things for himself. I sometimes wished that he would let me do more things for him, but nonetheless, being able to sit there and see everything that he was doing and look at every piece of paper that went across his desk was an invaluable experience.

Q: How did he interact with the Thai officials?

TOMSETH: He was very good. He had been DCM in Bangkok when U. Alexis Johnson was there in the late 1950s. Len is also very good at languages. While he didn't have a great deal of formal training other than getting an hour here and there with a teacher as he could, he could speak enough Thai to carry on a basic conversation with people. When he went off to see a minister of this or that, he did his business in English, but he could sit there and make the small talk in Thai. As I said, the Thais just love anybody who will even try. They may butcher the language, but if you make the effort, they really respond to that. He could do enough that it allowed him to really have some kind of rapport with people who really were not all that fluent in English themselves and often spoke no English. Prime Minister Tunom in those days knew almost no English.

Q: I imagine there was always the war issue, but...

TOMSETH: That dominated everything. In the time I was there, we had periodic civil air negotiations. By the time I left, Thailand was just beginning to develop a textile industry. I am not sure whether we made our first call on them before or just shortly after I left, but there were some textile negotiations. In the 1960s, most of Thailand's territorial sea was surveyed and blocks were auctioned off for oil exploration. Some of these were awarded at the tail end of my time there. UNOCAL wound up with a very big stake in that. So, there was some of that kind of business with the government as well. But it was really the war that just dominated everything else, the war and the insurgency. By the end of my time, narcotics was becoming a bit more of an issue. McCoy had published his book.

Q: What about your time in the Political Section? What slice of the pie were you given?

TOMSETH: I was made the biographic officer as a principal duty. There were other things I did. Particularly because I spoke Thai well, I was often called upon to go off to meetings with people and be the interpreter. But biographic work is good political training. Al Francis had done this. He had cycled through this. He also wound up in the Political Section as part of his time in Bangkok. He had done a very extensive family tree on the royal family and showed how people are related to one another through this royal family connection. So, in the course of that year, I learned a lot about who is related to whom, how do these families fit together? It really helped in understanding why people did certain things in a political context because of family connections, whether by blood or marriage.

Q: What about the royal family? At that point, what was the role as we saw it?

TOMSETH: During Surit's premiership from 1958 to early 1964, up to that point... In 1932, when there was a coup against the absolute monarchy, the king on the throne was somebody who really never had expected to become king. The coup group, which was both military and civilian at that point, did everything they could to put the monarchy over in a corner. After a couple of years of that, Botetikboke said, "Hell with this. I don't need it" and abdicated. There was a regency council for a little while. Then they chose as king the minor child of a prince who was way over on the side. The family was then in Switzerland and stayed in Switzerland with only a couple of visits back until after the end of World War II. In 1946, this young kid, who was only 19, was killed or shot himself (Nobody really knows what happened.) in the palace. His younger brother, who was then still a minor, was made king. He went back to Switzerland and stayed there most of the time until 1950 when he married and came back to Thailand. But through most of the 1950s, the monarchy was still hardly in the consciousness of most people.

But Surit saw this very attractive in a physical sense young king and his beautiful young wife as a potential political asset, so he started encouraging the king and the queen to travel around the country just in a ceremonial capacity. They did that. So, when I got there in 1967, even though Surit had died, this practice of spending a lot of time during the course of the year moving about the country and visiting villages was well entrenched. The monarchy had reemerged as an important symbolic institution. The military did everything they could to foster that. They made it one of the pillars of the Thai political system. It had no direct political power. It was all symbolic. But it had reemerged as an important factor.

That did not come into play in any kind of proactive political sense until 1973, at which point I was back in Washington and on the Thai desk.

Q: We'll cover that when we get there.

TOMSETH: During the four years that I was there, there was a lot of this traveling around the country.

Q: Was there much concern at that time on our part about corruption within the military ruling class, with the royal family, or with businesspeople?

TOMSETH: Not the royal family. There really wasn't any need for corruption in the royal family. After 1932, the government had set up something called the Crown Property Bureau. This was run by bureaucrats. The monies generated from that supported the royal family. It was quite adequate. Even in those days, it was plenty of money to support a royal family. Over the years, it's become fabulously wealthy. There is a lot of money in the Crown Property Bureau. Corruption is even less of an issue than potentially it could have been 35 years ago.

In the military, yes, this was something that was widespread, endemic, and well known and well documented. There were a number of American scholars in the 1950s and 1960s who had really gone into this and written books about it. So, it was a well known phenomenon. But the attitude was, you can't really do anything. It's there. You can't do anything about it. We need these guys.

Q: Did you get involved in keeping Thai troops in Vietnam?

TOMSETH: That was part of the issue. They initially sent a brigade, and it eventually wound up an entire division, and we paid for it.

Q: I used to watch them march into the PX in Cholon under the orders of non commissioned officers buy usually female items (perfume, powder, stockings, etc.) which they would march out and put on a truck while our provost marshal was getting redder and redder in the face watching this.

TOMSETH: There was great competition to get assigned to the Tiger Division. I don't know about the Thai. They are better lovers than they are fighters. But I know in the White Horse Division, the Korean case, a lot of people rather cynically said, "The way to clear the road in Vietnam is to tell the Koreans there is a PX at the end of it."

Q: Absolutely. I think they were each given a cubic ton or whatever of space on a ship on the way back. But they were good fighters.

Had you met your wife by this point?

TOMSETH: Yes. I met her in the spring of 1968 when I was working in the Political Military Section and Walt Reed and I were chasing ambulances. There was a very gruesome murder in the town of Takli, which was near one of the air bases. This was in central Thailand. The Air Force OSI was trying to work with the local cops. She was a prostitute. There was a suspicion or at least the possibility that one of her American customers was involved. The OSI was having a terrible time doing this. There wasn't a common language. The interpreter they had had been an AFS student and it just wasn't working very well. They really needed somebody who could interpret, but also understood the political dynamic. So, I was sent up there to work with the OSI and the local police on this for several weeks. Because of the nature of the crime, it was something that the sensationalist press in Bangkok had a field day with. I was going back and forth between Takli and Bangkok on the public affairs aspect of it all. My wife was the secretary to the press attache, so I met her in the course of that.

Q: Later, Bangkok became practically the sex capital of the world. I would think this would impact very heavily on the embassy, problems and all that. At least you had the R&R business.

TOMSETH: Yes. Sex was readily available and very open in Bangkok. Bangkok was a popular R&R center because of that. There was a whole strip that really catered to American GIs. Some of the criminal jurisdiction cases we had rose out of bar fights and somebody beating up his sweetheart for the night or whatever. But I think what turned Bangkok into what it subsequently became known for really was a phenomenon of the 1970s and Europeans and Japanese more than Americans.

Q: In 1971, you left Thailand and went where?

TOMSETH: To the Board of Examiners.

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Q: Today is May 20, 1999. Victor, the Board of Examiners. How long were you there?

TOMSETH: One year.

Q: 1971 to 1972.

TOMSETH: Right. This came about... John Burns was the director general of the Foreign Service. He came out to Bangkok to explain the latest iteration of Personnel policy. This is a sidetrack, but it is a funny sidetrack because it is a recurring theme throughout the Foreign Service. John Burns and Norman Hannah, who was then the DCM in Bangkok, had come into the Foreign Service together. The program was that they assembled all of the American staff and John began to explain what we were going to do in the 1970s. After a while, Norman couldn't stand this anymore and said, "God dammit, John, you and I have been in the Foreign Service since 1940 whatever it was. We've had a Personnel change every two or three years. You know as well as I do that any one of them would have worked if we had just given them a chance." I subsequently saw in my Foreign Service career the wisdom of that point of view.

Q: Absolutely! All of us can testify to that.

TOMSETH: In any event, John Burns came back to Washington and told John Stutesman, who was then head of the Board of Examiners, that I might be a prospect for his operation. What John Stutesman had done at BEX at that time was, his view was that you shouldn't just have senior officers interviewing these prospective Foreign Service officers, but you should have everyone from junior to senior, men, women, black, green, brown, you name it. I was one of the junior officers that was brought into BEX during his time. His view also was that nobody should stay there longer than a year, that you do one cycle and then you've pretty much done it.

Q: I'd like to talk a little bit about this. I think it's very important. John Stutesman seems to be one of the intellectuals within the Foreign Service who thought about this as a career, as a profession, more than going ahead with policy per se. I don't know what happened, whether he got badly mauled, but he never reached really senior ranks. He may have been promoted to senior ranks, but he was never an ambassador. He ended up in Vancouver and all. But I think he was a major figure in the Foreign Service. At least this is the impression I get.

TOMSETH: I have a lot of admiration for him.

Q: Could you talk about how John Stutesman operated at that time?

TOMSETH: Yes. I have a lot of admiration for John. He is one of the smartest people I met. As you say, he never just accepted the way things were done because that's the way they were done. He was always looking at systems within the Foreign Service to see what might be done in a different way that would produce a better result. That was certainly the approach that he took in the Board of Examiners. He really wanted to shake things up. Among other things, he brought in an outside consultant to look at the whole process of how the examination was conducted, what could be done in the written examination to make it more relevant to what the Foreign Service actually does, what could we do in the oral examination process that would do the same sort of thing.

What happened to him was, he found himself in Personnel at the time that Alison Palmer began her crusade. John Burns was part of that, as was John Stutesman and several other people. Whether or not they had personal responsibility for what was done to Alison Palmer, the fact that they were in Personnel in senior positions at that time impacted on their subsequent assignments. John himself was deemed not to be confirmable. As a result, the administration was not prepared to put his name forward for an ambassadorial position. He wound up in Vancouver and retired from there.

Q: There is a Board of Examiners and then there are the examiners, two different things. The Board of Examiners is a group of well meaning citizens at the top.

TOMSETH: It's also the office. The office is called the Board of Examiners.

Q: We're talking about the office of the Board of Examiners. How were the examinations conducted, both the written and the oral, at that time, 1971 1972?

TOMSETH: Well, the written examination at that point was pretty much as it had been for some time, not at all different than when I had taken it in the early 1960s. It was administered by the Educational Testing Service. One of the things that John was trying to do was to get the people who put the exam together to make it more professionally relevant to what Foreign Service officers actually did. The oral examinations, too, were not much different than I rememberemy oral examination coming in a few years before. But again, what John was trying to dand you saw this a few years down the roawas restructuring the oral examination. When we were doing it, we would see probably four candidates a day. They were taken individually and you spent twhours with each one of them. I went back and watched the operation a few years later. It was much different. I think it was much better in that people came in in the morning and spent the day there. They would do some things individually with examiners and some things collectively. One of the things that I thought was really a great innovation that grew out of what John had been working on was a group exercise in which each one was given an AID type project in a country here or there. Then they were brought together and told there was only X amount of money for all of these projects, which was less than the total that you would need if you added them up individually. Then they had to negotiate how they were going to divide up that pie. The idea was not who had the better project, but how they conducted themselves in this group setting, how they related to their colleagues around the table, how they negotiated, what kinds of compromises were they prepared to make. Just a much better technique than posing hypothetical questions that individuals were asked to answer in the time that I had both taken the examination coming into the Foreign Service and when I was at the Board of Examiners.

I should mention one other thing that John did that I thought was really very good. When everybody reported to BEX in the late summer to begin the cycle, he made them take the written examination. That at the outset was a good exercise in humility just to remind people who were going to be doing these interviews what the people they were interviewing had gone through in terms of the written examination.

Q: Can you describe a typical type of interview?

TOMSETH: In the fall, we had some people who were sort of left over from the exam the previous winter, so we were doing those in Washington. Then after the exam had been given in late November or December and those had been corrected by the Educational Testing Service, we began a new cycle where we went around the country and interviewed people. John divided people up into teams so that you would have a mix of age, rank, professional discipline, on each team. The one that I was assigned to was chaired by a fellow named Sam Pinkney, a black officer who had been a career military officer before he came into the Foreign Service. His specialty was administration. There was a middle grade consular officer, Don Castile, and myself. I was still a junior officer at that point. The people that we interviewed were not specified as consular, administrative, political, whatever. They were whatever came up in that geographic context. So, if we went to Denver, we interviewed all of the people who had passed the examination whether they were pointed towards economic, political, or whatever. As I said, the approach that we took in the interview was a very traditional one. They were hypothetical questions about "What would you do if" and "What do you know about?" Really an attempt to draw out the person in the oral process in a dimension that you can't really get at through the written examination, but building on the sorts of things that had been addressed in the different segments of the written examination. So, it wasn't really very revolutionary at that particular stage in terms of what we were doing.

Q: I think one of the things was that there are people who are exam passers. They can pass any exam, particularly if it's multiple choice, but when you sit them down and talk to them, you can often eliminate this type of person if they really just can sniff out a written exam.

TOMSETH: Yes, and we met a number of people like that. One I remember in particular was a very difficult case. He worked for Greyhound Bus in some rural parish of Louisiana. He was basically a ticket seller. Apparently, he had lots of spare time on the job. He had read voraciously and he knew everything, but this was not somebody who was going to do well in the Foreign Service. He had hardly been out of southern Louisiana and just in a number of respects was not somebody who was going to fit into that Foreign Service milieu. That was obvious. But the guy was smart and he was well read, so it was a difficult decision. It wasn't that he did so badly on the oral portion of the exam, but it was quite clear that here was a person who was much better suited to that Greyhound Bus station in Louisiana than he would be in the Foreign Service.

Q: Was there an attempt to go after African Americans or women in those days?

TOMSETH: Not so much women. African Americans, yes. Indeed, at that point, they had a special program which was subsequently tossed out in a court case that allowed African Americans to take the oral interview without having taken the written examination previously. We were given a quota that year. We could take as many as 20. We got a few out of that program that have been successful Foreign Service officers in the time since. But one of the problems we had was, the State Department wasn't the only organization in the federal government or the private sector that was doing that sort of thing. The competition for what was a relatively small pool of people who were both qualified, but perhaps more important, interested in the Foreign Service was fierce.

Q: I spent a year doing the Board of Examiners, too. What was your impression of the people coming up before you?

TOMSETH: I had one impression, which... At that particular time, when people took the written examination, they were not required to do an essay at the exam, but when they came in, they were asked to come in an hour before they would be interviewed and to write a short essay, which was then available to the examiners to read quickly before you sat down with them. It wasn't scored in any way. It was just a way of looking at how well people could express themselves in writing. These were people who had passed the written examination and the overwhelming impression I had of the vast majority of these people was that they couldn't parse a sentence.

Q: I was a history major, so I continue to feel that in order to represent the United States, you ought to know American history basically. I would find people who couldn't quite place the Industrial Revolution with the Civil war or with the Roosevelt regime. This bothered the hell out of me.

TOMSETH: Yes, I think there are things like that. On the writing, I don't know whether it was just a cohort that was the victim of the American education system that passed through at that particular point in time or what, but in subsequent years, people who came in later that I saw as junior officers in the 1980s and into the early 1990s (These were people who had passed through the system.) were much better writers in general than that group of people that came out of the late 1960s/early 1970s, it seems.

Q: Did you notice any regional differences? Was there concern that too many people were coming from Georgetown or from the Ivy League schools or not? Did that seem to make a difference?

TOMSETH: Well, we were given general guidance sort of like the Clinton administration's, "a government service that looks like America." But no quotas or anything. Quite frankly, we didn't have a great deal of difficulty finding people from the South, the West, or the Midwest who were perfectly qualified to be Foreign Service officers. There were plenty of good candidates, so you didn't have to work very hard at making sure that there was a reasonable geographic balance.

I saw something not too long ago that was rather interesting in that regard. When I came into the Foreign Service, about half of my class had graduate degrees of one sort of another, a law degree or some kind of degree. As I mentioned the other day, in that group, there was a larger collection of eastern private school, Ivy League graduates than I had ever encountered. But this data that I saw not too long ago in "The Foreign Service Journal" or maybe it was a newsletter indicated that the percentage of people coming into the Foreign Service today with degrees, often advanced degrees, to be sure, from these Ivy League and eastern private schools is higher than it was at the time that I came into the Foreign Service 30 odd years ago. I think what that reflects is something that's happening in American society generally, which is a lot more people go on to graduate school and the best of them do gravitate to these Ivy League eastern private schools. So, they may have graduated from Iowa State, but their advanced degree is from Georgetown.

Q: As I've conducted these interviews, I've noticed this. A good number have gotten Harvard or Yale advanced degrees, but often their parents didn't get through high school and they come from small places, but they are smart. If you're smart, through scholarships and everything else, you go for the best. There is no really disputing that there are five or six schools that anybody would prefer to go to unless they have a real specialization. It has to do more with merit than with old money.

TOMSETH: I think that's exactly right, that most of the people in my incoming class who had gone to these schools were the sort of people that you would expect to have gone to those schools at that particular time. People who are coming in today, even though the percentage is higher, come from all over.

Q: You talked about trying to make the Foreign Service more American. To show you the theme, when I came in in 1955, the watchword was that they wanted to insert more "mainstream" America into the Foreign Service.

In 1972, after your year there, where did you go?

TOMSETH: I went to Cornell. This was when the State Department still had money to send people off for area studies programs. EAP sent one person each year to... It didn't have to be Cornell, but it has the best Southeast Asia program, so more often than not, people chose to go there. In 1972, I was the EAP person to go to Southeast Asian area studies.

Q: I'd like you to talk as much as you can about Cornell. Particularly people who have served in Indonesia, steam starts to come out of their ears when they talk about Cornell as being thhotbed of the left wing Harafa Sukarno type thing. I wonder if you could tell about what was your attitude when you went there and then how did it turn out?

TOMSETH: I went to Cornell without a great deal of prejudice. I knew of some of the people there, but more the people involved in Thailand than in Indonesia: David Wyatt, Loriston Sharpe... Sharpe had actually been in the State Department in the 1940s when after the war it was recognized that the State Department didn't have a lot of expertise on some of these areas that were now much more important than they had been before. Those people did not have the same kind of reputation as the Indonesian scholars, principally George Kayan and Ben Anderson. Ben Anderson was very up front and said, "I am a communist. I am a man of the left." But by the time I got there in 1972, even Kayan and Anderson had become much more focused on Vietnam than they were Indonesia. They weren't the only ones. The whole Southeast Asian program at Cornell and elsewhere, I think scholars involved in Southeast Asia were almost universally opposed to the war in Vietnam. Of those people, I got to know Ben Anderson better than Kayan. Kayan was much more senior and was doing a lot of consulting work outside, so he would come and go, but Ben was there all the time. I had a couple of classes with him, including one that was just a super class.

I, notwithstanding his politics, came to the conclusion that he was a terrific scholar and really a great person. I found it very rewarding to work with him. That comes to this one class, which was on political biography, where he asked people to, in effect, do biographies on Southeast Asian figures, but using vernacular language materials. You could not rely upon translations or what Westerners had written about the individual you chose, but had to do this in the local language, whether that was Indonesian or... In my case, I chose Surit Tanarat to have been prime minister in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Thailand. There was a lot of Thai language source material in the library on Surit. So, I was able to do a fairly detailed biography of him, which the Southeast Asian Studies Center subsequently published as an annex to a Ph.D. dissertation. But that project and Ben's approach to it, that if you're going to understand these people, you really have to do it through the medium of their own language, was excellent. Again, it was very good training for the Foreign Service.

Q: In 1972 1973, we were pretty well out of Vietnam. I think the draft had stopped by that point, hadn't it?

TOMSETH: Yes, I think that was sometime in early 1972. But by that point, they had already gone to the lottery system, so people in graduate school knew where they stood vis a vis the selective service system, so that was not a big issue. By the summer of 1973, after I had left Cornell and come back to the Department, you had the congressionally imposed bombing halt and the agreement... That happened during the winter, in January. After the Christmas bombing, they reached an agreement with the North Vietnamese that envisioned the removal of all U.S. combat forces from Vietnam. So, that was winding down.

The Philippines was building up. Marshall law was declared while I was at Cornell. That began to get the attention of people, both faculty and students at Cornell.

Q: You were concentrating again on Thailand?

TOMSETH: On mainland Southeast Asia, although I took advantage of the expertise that they had at Cornell on Indonesia and the Philippines to get better acquainted with that part of Southeast Asia, but my real specialty was mainland Southeast Asia, Indochina, Thailand, and Burma.

Q: What was the feeling towards Burma? Was there much study about Burma?

TOMSETH: Not at all. It was the Hermit Kingdom at that point. May Win had been in for 10 years since the second time he had taken over. People just didn't know very much about Burma. It was difficult to get into, although the president of the... There was an Association for Southeast Asian Studies and the president of the Association was a fellow named John Wyatt, who subsequently came to work for the State Department when he couldn't get an academic job. His specialty was Burma. He had been in the Special Forces and had been trained in Burmese by the Army, so he did his dissertation on something having to do with Burma, but he was one of the few.

Q: From that academic side, did you see a different Thailand from the State Department?

TOMSETH: I guess a lot of the expertise there was focused on different aspects of Thai society than the U.S. government was preoccupied with at the time, although it wasn't totally divorced from it. There had been a lot of anthropological work done by people at Cornell in the 1950s into the 1960s even. That was a good academic, intellectual basis for programs that AID was involved with in the Counterinsurgency Program, for example. Some of those people had gone back and forth between academia and AID, so there was a connection in that regard.

But somebody like David Wyatt, who was a historian and whose real specialty was the reign of Juwalankon from the 1870s to 1910, the work that he was doing other than he had to know that to really understand what was going on today, didn't seem to have that much of a direct connection for contemporary events in Thailand.

Q: Were you working towards another degree?

TOMSETH: No, I was only going to be there for an academic year and I already had a master's degree, so rather than put myself into a straightjacket requirement for a degree, I used it to take any course that I thought would be relevant to what I was interested in. As a result, I took some classes that I wouldn't have otherwise taken, such as a course in art history and an economics course on agricultural reform in the Philippines, which I never would have taken if I was working for a degree.

Q: The degree business does narrow one. In fact, I noticed this when I was with the Board of Examiners. Sometimes we would get somebody there who was working on a Ph.D. on Mongolian history and thought this would be a natural for the Foreign Service and yet they did very poorly. There is this narrowing of outlook.

TOMSETH: Yes. I think particularly as one gets involved in the doctoral aspect of an advanced degree... It's not so much with the master's, which is a little more gentle. But I saw the same thing, whether at the Board of Examiners or elsewhere. People who had done a Ph.D. often were very narrowly specialized and that didn't really do them a whole lot of good in terms of the more generalist approach of the Foreign Service... The pendulum goes back and forth, to be sure. But over the years, I think the greater value is put on a good generalist than a highly specialized person.

Q: In 1973, whither?

TOMSETH: In 1973, I came back to Washington to EAP as one of the Thai desk officers for Political and Political Military.

Q: You did that from 1973 to when?

TOMSETH: Until 1975. By that point, Henry Kissinger had become Secretary of State and had decreed the Global Outlook Policy (GLOP). I figured I had been in the Foreign Service for almost 10 years and I had not only done nothing but Southeast Asia, with that one year at BEX being the exception, I had done almost nothing but Thailand. So I figured I was a prime candidate for GLOP and started looking around for an out of area assignment that I thought would be interesting. I had been to Iran a couple of times, so I thought Iran would be interesting. I put my name in for Farsi language training.

Q: Let's stick to EAP for now. During this 1973 1975 period on the Thai desk, what were our concerns with Thailand at that time?

TOMSETH: Two mainly. One was disengaging in a security sense. The other one was what kind of a relationship are we going to have, not only in the aftermath of Vietnam, but in the aftermath of something that happened domestically in a political context in Thailand. That was a student movement that resulted in the ouster of the military clique that had been in charge for 16 years from 1957 to the fall of 1973. During that period that I was on the desk, you had for the first time in a long time real participatory politics going on in Thailand, an elected parliament that actually exercised real political power in Thailand. Given the student context that had brought this government into office (Actually, there were two or three of them in the space of the three years until the military intervened again in 1976.), they were confronted with this American retreat from not only Thailand, but Southeast Asia generally, and in 1975, communist victories in all three Indochinese states, and "How do we make our peace with those countries and China in a context where it looks like the United States is putting its tail between its legs and getting out of the region altogether?"

Q: Who was the assistant secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs?

TOMSETH: We had two while I was there. Bob Ingersoll came in just about the time I came back from Cornell. Then Phil Habib 15 18 months later took his place.

Q: Was the fact that things were beginning to fall apart in Vietnam or was it apparent when you arrived... Did that have an influence on how EAP operated?

TOMSETH: The settlement had been negotiated just before I got back and was being implemented when I reported for duty in June. Then the congressionally mandated bombing halt was imposed in August. But I think even at that point, the hope was that Vietnamization would work, that the South Vietnamese military had been developed to a point that, with U.S. financial support, they would be able to hold their own. For a good bit of the time I was on the desk, nothing happened that suggested that that hope wouldn't be realized. It was really only at the beginning of 1975 when the North Vietnamese began a concerted push that things fell aparand they fell apart quite rapidly. There were some people who felt (Graham Martin was certainly one of them.) that if Congress had come through with more funding for ammunition, the South Vietnamese would have been able to hold off this offensive. I don't think so. I think the organization was so corrupt from top to bottom that you could have had unlimited resources and they would have collapsed in the face of this offensive.

Cambodia was a little different situation. There, from a very early stage, the regime found itself in a few enclaves with the vast majority of the countryside controlled by the Khmer Rouge. I think throughout the period that I was on the desk, the outlook for Cambodia was much less optimistic than it was for Vietnam, at least for a year and a half during that period.

In Laos, in 1973, as a sideshow to what was going on in Vietnam, there had been an agreement to create for the third time a coalition government that would have all three factions involved. Even into early 1975, it looked like that was working fairly well. It was only with the collapse of Vietnam and Cambodia that the Pathet Lao were emboldened to begin pushing their partners in this coalition out and the coalition partners, seeing what had happened in Vietnam and Cambodia, were eminently pushable at that point. There, the denouement was that during the summer and fall, more and more of the neutralists and rightists left the country to the point where in December, it was a fairly easy proposition for the Pathet Lao to declare the monarchy abolished and to proclaim a People's Democratic Republic.

Q: How were the developments in Cambodia reflected in Thailand from your perspective?

TOMSETH: I think for the Thai, they were absolutely panic-stricken. There is a corridor that runs through central Cambodia into eastern Thailand right onto Bangkok. During the dry season, it's ideal tank country. The Thai could see Vietnamese divisions sweeping through that corridor on to Bangkok. There was sort of the wry view going around. Thailand at that point was, "Well, our ultimate defense is going to be Bangkok's traffic. That will slow these tanks down, but nothing else will." There was already an effort underway to try to patch things up with China. Up to 1975, the Thai government recognized the Republic of China on Taiwan. In the course of just a few months after the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh, the Thai established diplomatic relations, had broken them with Taiwan and established them with China, and did the same thing with Hanoi. They tried to do the same thing with Phnom Penh. They actually did recognize one another, but from the very beginning had trouble with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge were doing the same thing across the Thai border that they began doing across the Vietnamese border. It was causing a real problem for Thai security forces along that border. But their greatest fear, that Vietnam would move into Cambodia in force and then on to Thailand, never materialized until the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese fell out irrevocably in 1978 and the Vietnamese occupied Cambodia in late 1978/early 1979, at which point the Thai, in effect, joined forces with the Khmer Rouge to try and create some kind of cordon sanitaire around the border.

Q: How were we viewing the student movements that resulted in major change in government? In the beginning, was there concern... Students are usually pretty far to the left. Otherwise, they wouldn't be students. What was the history of what we were getting from our embassy about the student movements and how were we viewing them at that time?

TOMSETH: Traditionally, students in Thailand tend to be very passive. There have not been many occasions when students were deeply involved in the political process.

Q: Not like Korea, where every

TOMSETH: Not even like Indonesia, for example. In a way, it was sort of interesting. We changed ambassadors just as this was happening. Len Unger left after over six years in Thailand in the fall of 1973. A non career person went out. His inclination was to try to get behind this movement, that certainly as we were disengaging in a military sense from Southeast Asia, it made sense to a lot of people in the embassy and in Washington to try and engage more proactively in a political relationship, particularly in circumstances where the government was much more democratic than it had been in a long, long time, in more than two decades in Thailand. That sentiment though was not embraced enthusiastically in Thailand itself among the student groups. They tended to see themselves as much more leftist than people in Washington and the embassy thought they were and were inclined to look at relations with the United States through the prism of the previous two decades when U.S. Thai relations were overwhelmingly a relationship with the Thai military. So, during that three year period, you had Washington and the embassy, in effect, trying to court these people and democratic forces generally within Thailand, but in the case of the students, sort of an arm's length approach. Many of them were not too keen on getting very close to the U.S. mission in Thailand. Interestingly enough, in the fall of 1976, the military intervened again in a context in which there was increasing polarization among students themselves with university students much more leftist and students at vocational schools becoming the pawns of rightists forces and the military. Clashes between these groups provided the excuse for the military to intervene once again.

These university students, for the most part, took one of two courses. They either went to the jungle to join the insurgents or they wound up coming to the United States. Some of the most radical of the students who were the least inclined to reciprocate to these overtures that the U.S. had been making during the previous three years wound up at Cornell.

Q: Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State. Was there much interest from above?

TOMSETH: Sitting where I was, my impression of Henry Kissinger's management style in the State Department was to gather around him a small coterie of people, most of them Foreign Service officers, and to use them to isolate what was important in foreign policy from the rest of the State Department. Those of us in our various regional vineyards did what we could to tend bilateral relationships, but if it wasn't on Henry Kissinger's agenda, it got no attention from the seventh floor. That was largely the case with Thailand in particular. From Kissinger's point of view, the important thing was the peace agreement that he had been instrumental in negotiating and implementing that and very little else as it pertained to Southeast Asia. So, what the bureau and the desk found itself doing was trying to manage this disengagement in a security sense from Southeast Asia in a context in Thailand, where we had a domestic political upheaval, in a way that was going to maintain some kind of productive bilateral relationship with Thailand, one that we fully expected was going to be quite different than it had been for the previous 20 years, but not to abandon Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia to its fate, as was implied by the approach that Kissinger was taking.

Q: With Thailand, were we shutting down our bases there?

TOMSETH: That process had been underway as part of Vietnamization frothe early days of the Nixon administration. While I was still in Thailand, before mid 1971, we actually closed one of the large Air Force bases at Takli, only to reopen it a year or so later when we wrapped up for the bombing campaign as part of Kissinger's strategy to get the North Vietnamese to agree to some kind of a settlement that would allow us to get everybody out of Vietnam. But with the bombing halt in August of 1973, the utility of those bases became nil almost overnight. So, from 1973 to the collapse in Vietnam and Cambodia in the spring of 1975, we were drawing down those forces very rapidly and closing things right and left. We did want to maintain the military... We had a very extensive signal intelligence operation

Q: This is intercepting communications from other countries.

TOMSETH: But this was very extensive and done in cooperation with the Thai military. They and we were both benefitting from this. The Thai military also wanted to continue this, but because it was targeted to a very large extent on Indochina and China, the civilian government in its effort to come to some kind of modus vivendi with these governments that it hadn't even recognized a few months previously, was not prepared to allow us to continue those operations with the numbers of people that we have. There were well over 2,000 Americans who were on the ground in Thailand as part of this signal intelligence operation. The civilian government simply wasn't prepared to have that kind of continuing U.S. military presence targeted against countries that it now felt it had to come to some kind of accommodation with. Ultimately, the operation in terms of American personnel was scaled back tremendously. We didn't close it down entirely.

But the interesting thing is that technology in this area moves so quickly that within two or three years, you didn't need all those people on the ground anyway. So, to this day, there is a continuing cooperation with Thailand on this sort of thing, but it doesn't involve large numbers of Americans on the ground.

Q: Were we finding our military talking to Thai military? Was there one of these things where we were trying to hold the civilian hand and the military hand at the same time?

TOMSETH: As I said the other day, the relationship that we had with the Thai military was a longstanding and pervasive one. Yes, during this period, 1973 1976, when you had civilian governments in power, and even though there was a disengagement from Indochina, we kept our lines open to the Thai military. Those channels of communication became quite important in the late 1970s and 1980s, first in the context of the military reinserting itself in the political process in 1976. Then in 1978 and 1979 with the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, Thailand saw once again the importance of some kind of a security relationship with the United States. Having those lines of communications open during that period made it much easier to reestablish a much more robust kind of security relationship than we had had during that period in the mid 1970s.

Q: When did the Thais pull their Tiger Division out of Vietnam? Also, there were troops in Lao uniforms, weren't there? During this period, was there a withdrawal to homeland Thailand?

TOMSETH: The Tiger Division in Vietnam came out as part of the early 1973 peace agreement. In Laos, it was a little more complex. Again, sort of on the side, the Vietnamese agreement... The three factions in Laos formed a coalition government. They agreed among themselves that there would be a cessation of military operations. Basically what you had in Laos in terms of U.S. involvement, there was a royal army that was absolutely ineffectual. Then there was a paramilitary force that was nominally subordinate to the Royal Lao Army, but in effect was run by the CIA. They had recruited very extensively among Lao highlanders, particularly the Hmong ethnic group. A lot of these units were officered by Thai mercenaries, in effect, people who had been hired by the Agency in Thailand or were active duty Thai. army officers, in effect, seconded to this operation. Some of those people came home after 1973, but right up to 1975, there were still those kinds of people in these paramilitary units. Athe Pathet Lao began its push in the late spring, summer, and fall of 1975, particularly after the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon, those people started coming out. They were withdrawn. That in turn sparked a massive refugee outflow. A lot of these, both lowland, but particularly highland Lao, who had provided the troops and their families and their families' families, began pouring into Thailand. At one point, you had upwards of 100,000 Lao refugees in camps in Thailand, many of them highlanders.

Q: When did you leave to go to training?

TOMSETH: I guess I checked out of EAP in the latter part of July and reported to FSI a couple of weeks later to begin language training.

Q: Did you get involved in the early problems of boat people and refugees?

TOMSETH: Boat people didn't start showing up until a little bit later. While I was still in EAP, the big refugee issue was the ones that we brought out as South Vietnam went down. It really wasn't until a few months later that you began to have Vietnamese arriving in Thailand who had crossed through Cambodia or Laos in some cases. That was a phenomenon that really didn't get underway until that latter part of 1975. By that point, I had left the bureau. Then a little bit later you started having this flow of boat people out of Vietnam as well.

Q: What about the refugees coming to Thailand while you were there? Were we trying to do something about it?

TOMSETH: The big flow of refugeewhile I was still there were from Laos. Yes, there was a lot of scrambling arounwhat do you do with these people? A bunch of them were put at one of the air bases that we had used only very little in northeastern Thailand, in Nonpom in Konkeng Province. Then there were some camps set up along the Lao border that were viewed initially as temporary, but several of them were there for nearly 20 years.

Q: You had first Ingersoll and then Habib. Did you have much contact with these men?

TOMSETH: I was a lowly middle grade officer, a desk officer. But both of them were pretty good about coming out of the front office and visiting the country desk on a regular basis. Ingersoll had been ambassador in Japan, but he was a political appointee out of a business background. He was very interested in the Foreign Service and the State Department and how it worked. I found him a good assistant secretary. I think his tenure, while it was brief, was a very positive one. Phil Habib, of course, was one of the great men of the Foreign Service.

Q: I would think that he would be so busy at other things... He always seemed to be in orbit, whether he was retired or not. I would think that there wouldn't be much contact concerning Thailand.

TOMSETH: Well, not a lot, but he was interested. We had a particular Thailand issue that he had to deal with. This political appointee replacement for Leonard Unger, whose name was Bill Kintner... He had been an Army officer, retired, and then went to a think tank attached to the University of Pennsylvania and was headed by Robert Strausz-Hupï¿½. Kintner was his deputy at the center. The story is (and I don't know whether it's true or not) that his connection to Henry Kissinger was that while he was at the center at the University of Pennsylvania, Kissinger was well known, but nonetheless just an academic at Harvard, and Kintner actually introduced him to Nelson Rockefeller and Nelson Rockefeller then used Kissinger as a policy consultant. That was really his entree into Republican Party politics. Kintner was Kissinger's personal choice to go out to Thailand to replace Len Unger. Kintner wasn't a bad person. In the context of this student revolution that we had in Thailand, his instincts were correct. He saw this as an opportunity and wanted to reach out to students and democratic forces generally. But he had a severe drinking problem. This became more and more of a problem in terms of dealing with the Thais, not that the Thais are prudish about drinking. They have plenty of people in high positions over the years who have had their own drinking problem, Surit being one of the more famous ones. But from the point of view of the bureau, it was becoming a problem. The event that precipitated doing something about it was the Marine Corps Ball in 1974. Kintner fell off the stage into the band. At that point, George Roberts was then country director for Thailand and Burma. George first went to Art Hummel, who was the deputy assistant secretary for Southeast Asia. Then he went with Art to Phil and said, "We have to get Kintner out of there. This is really becoming too much of a problem." Then the question was, who was going to go to Henry Kissinger. Phil took that on. He went to Kissinger and convinced him that a way had to be found to bring Kintner out of Bangkok as gracefully as possible and convinced Kissinger to do that.

Q: You left this Thai concentration. For how many years had this been?

TOMSETH: Depending on how you count it... I went into Thai language training in October of 1966 and out to Thailand in April, was there until June of 1971, came back to the desk in June of 1973, and was there until the end of July of 1975. So, it had been about seven of my first nine years in the Foreign Service.

Q: As you cast your eye around to get another arrow in your quiver, what brought you to Farsi and to Iran?

TOMSETH: I had been to Iran a couple of times for short visits. It just seemed like an interesting place. Certainly at that point, it was getting a lot of attention, again, largely because of Henry Kissinge(end of tape)

In that last year I was on the Thai Desk, the second half of 1974, I knew I was going to be reassigned somewhere the next year. Personnel had asked me about some things, including a couple of things in Africa. I wasn't really sure I wanted to go to Africa. So, in the fall, trying to be proactive about GLOP before I was GLOPed, I came to the conclusion that I would throw my hat into the ring for Farsi language training. It seemed to me that it was sufficiently far out of Southeast Asia to satisfy the requirement. South Asia was the other possibility. That was a different regional bureau, but I wasn't sure that that was really going to be far enough removed from Southeast Asia to convince people in Personnel that it met the requirement. But it seemed to me that Iran would and it seemed to me that it would be an interesting place. So, I put in an application for Farsi language training. Lo and behold, Personnel came back and said, "We are prepared to do this if you are prepared to go be principal officer in " At that point, the post was in Khorramshahr, but they were going to move it to Shiraz. I got out the map and found out where Shiraz was and said, "Sure, that sounds fine to me. Sign me up."

Q: You took Farsi for how long?

TOMSETH: It was supposed to be the 44 week course. If I had known anything about Iran, I would have recognized the first day of language training that here was something that was very telling about Iranian society. They had two teachers who couldn't stand one another. The result was that rather than shift people between these two (There were seven of us who started at the same time.), they put four with one and the other three with the second. We didn't go back and forth. We, in effect, had two groups. I wound up with a couple who were there for just 24 weeks. In February, they left. There was one other 24 weeker in the other class. So, at that point, I went into the class I had not been in and the group I was with was way ahead of where they were. So, I was just spinning my wheels.

At that point, I went to Charlie Naas, who was the director for Iran. This was in the context where I knew that I was going to a post that issued visas. I had been in the Foreign Service for 10 years and I had never issued a visa in my life. I said, "Charlie, I've got a proposition. If NEA will support me when I go to FSI and say I'd like to get out of this language class early and go to Iran so that I can work in the Consular Section for a month or two so at least I know how you issue a visa when I go down to take charge of this post (I knew that they were always looking for people in the Consular Section in Teheran.), then I will do this to help the Consular Section out." Charlie's reaction was very interesting. He said, "Young man, my opinion of your intelligence just dropped precipitously." That I would volunteer to go into that consular mill in Teheran. But he did agree that NEA would support me with FSI. So I asked FSI if they would let me go right then.

Now, there was one part of the language program.. The last six weeks were with an Iranian family in Iran. So, I left FSI towards the end of March and went out to Iran and did another six weeks of language training in Shiraz living with an Iranian family. Then I went up to Teheran and worked in the Consular Section for a couple of months before reporting for duty in Shiraz the first of July.

Q: Were you married by this time?

TOMSETH: Yes, I had gotten married in 1969 in Thailand.

Q: Did you have children?

TOMSETH: We had a son. He was then six years old.

Q: How did it work out with that?

TOMSETH: I went out and stayed with this family for six weeks while my wife packed up. That was not the first time she wound up with that chore. Then they came out when I came up to Teheran to do this consular stint. Then we went down to Shiraz together in July.

Q: How did you find living with an Iranian family? How did that work?

TOMSETH: Very well. This was a fairly well to do Shiraz family. They had a couple of teenage sons. They took me right in. Persian hospitality can be absolutely overwhelming. They took me right in. Maybe it was the Peace Corps volunteer background or something, but I am fairly flexible about these things, so I didn't have any great difficulty making myself a part of that family. I stayed in touch with them throughout the time I was in Iran. Unfortunately, they, like so many Iranians, were among those that had to hightail it out of the country in 1979. They wound up in Los Angeles, materially in comfortable enough circumstances, but I think they were people that really didn't want to be exiled. They wanted to be in Iran and had a pretty hard time of it psychologically.

Q: When you were doing consular work... With my background as a consular officer, Iranian students going after visas were a phenomenon. I'd get them in Yugoslavia, Greece, and Italy. Everywhere I've been, they were wandering around looking for visas. This was a real consular situation. How did you find dealing on the line in the Consular Section?

TOMSETH: Well, it was a gut wrenching experience. It certainly made me (and I have ever since been) extremely sympathetic to the job that consular officers have to dand particularly junior officers. So many of them, this is their first Foreign Service assignment. They are put on the line where people are prepared and almost enthusiastic about lying, cheating, anything they can do to get what they want. How one can maintain some perspective on humanity to begin with, but the particular society out of which these people come in particular is a challenge every day that they get up and go to that job.

Q: Did you find that in the long run, this was helpful to understand Iranian society?

TOMSETH: Yes, absolutely. While it isn't the whole picture, that isn't all that Iranian society is about, it does demonstrate a very important dimension of Iranian society. I used that experience both from the Consular Section in Teheran and then later in Shiraz in the political reporting that we did from Shiraz and then subsequently when I was political counselor in Teheran about the nature of Iranian society and what that means, for example, in terms of the kind of negotiations that we found ourselves in in the spring and summer of 1979 after the Shah had left and we were trying to deal with this new Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran. A lot of what I had learned on the line in Teheran and in Shiraz dealing with visa applicants was relevant to that.

Q: You were in Shiraz from when to when?

TOMSETH: From July of 1976 until February of 1979.

Q: Could you explain what Shiraz was like when you arrived there? What was the importance of Shiraz?

TOMSETH: I had served in a couple of constituent posts in Thailand, in Chiang Mai and Udorn. These were so called "Special Purposes Posts" in the absolute sense. They did almost no consular work other than renewing an occasional American passport. Their sole reason for existence was to do political reporting.

The consular posts in Iran were also Special Purposes Posts. Their main function was supposed to be political reporting, but they had always done consular work as well. In the old days, in the 1950s and 1960s, that meant occasionally issuing a visa. Evan as recently as 1972/1973 when the consulate in southern Iran was still in Khorramshahr, Mike Hornblow, who had been principal officer, told me that anyone who came in for a visa was invited into the principal officer's office for a cup of tea for the interview and while the visa was processed, that there were that few. But by the time I got there, Shiraz, this little constituent post in southern Iran, was doing 10,000 student visas a year.

Q: My god. Who were the students? One always thinks that the intellectual elite would be up around Teheran. Where is Shiraz?

TOMSETH: If you go due south of Teheran to the Persian Gulf, about 500 miles as the crow flies, you come to Isfahan, and then another 500 miles almost due south from Isfahan is Shiraz.

Q: Were you opposite the Straits of Hormuz or anything like that?

TOMSETH: Not quite. The Straits of Hormuz are a little further east.

Q: Were you a seaport?

TOMSETH: No. You had to drive about four hours to Bushir, which was the closest seaport. Shiraz sits up on the plateau. It is about 5,800 feet high. It's in the Zagroz Mountains. You go down this escarpment to the coast and Bushir. It is about a four hour drive.

Q: Is this a tribal, national area, within the Iranian nation?

TOMSETH: To go back for a moment to your earlier question about elites, Iran has always been a country where provincial centers were quite important and had their own elites. It is not like Thailand, for example, or Burma, where elites were a phenomenon of the capital city only. So, you have these centers like Tabriz, Khorasan, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Karmon in the central desert that all have their own societies that were quite well developed and at different points in Persian history, they might actually have been kingdoms as part of the larger Iranian cultural heartland. So, you do have those things.

Shiraz, sitting in the Zagroz Mountains, is a tribal area. There are a lot of Turkish speaking groups, the most important of which are the Khaskai, who live in that area. Their traditional economy was pasturing their animals in the mountains in the summer months and taking them down to the coastal areas during the winter months.

Q: 10,000 students is a hell of a lot for a post... Going to the United States is a pretty sophisticated step for anybody.

TOMSETH: Well, the consular district is the southern 40% of Iran. That included cities, Shiraz itself, Karmon, Afaz, Khorramshahr, Abadan, and Khuzestan Province. That is the center of the oil industry. So, there were a lot of people in the 1970s who were making a lot of money because of the oil industry more than anything else, but also development projects in other areas. In Karmon, there was a large (At that point, it was supposed to be the world's largest.) open pit copper mine being developed in Karmon. There were a lot of military base construction activities in places like Bandarabas and Bandarshapour. So, there was a lot of money being generated and turned people who essentially were peasants but might have owned some land into overnight millionaires. So, they had the wherewithal to send their children off to the United States. Particularly if they had male children, they had an incentive to get them out of Iran so they could avoid the draft.

Q: When you arrived there in 1976, what was the feeling that you got from the State Department about the Shah and whither Iran at that time?

TOMSETH: Richard Helms was ambassador. A fellow named Jack Miklos was his deputy chief of mission. When I went down to stay with this family, I through them met a lot of the local elite in Shiraz and the area. The wife of this fellow came from one of these nomadic tribes. She was not Khaskai. She was from a smaller tribe. So, they introduced me to some of these people as well. I remember the first time I had... There is a dish in Iran called "calipatche." It is the head and feet of the sheep. The first time I had this, my host's father-in-law, who was the head (the han) of this little tribe, was in visiting. It was a breakfast dish. When it was served, the haperfectly seriously; he was not trying to get to msaid to hosts, this family I was living with, "Be sure to give him an eye." That is one of the better parts. I had no difficulty with the eye. The ear was much more difficult. It is gristly and it still had hair in it! In the six weeks that I was there, from meeting all these people, I began to get some impressions about how at least this class of Iranians felt about the regime. It basically was, well, we are willing to go along with it until something better comes along, but we won't have a moment's hesitation in abandoning the Shah if it looks like there is something better on the horizon. I wrote that up when I finished up my language training and gave it to Henry Precht, who was then the political military officer in the embassy. He thought it was great and wanted to send it out as a cable. It did go out, but Jack Miklos called me into his office and told me that "You know, The New York Times and The Washington Post can and do report everything that is wrong with Iran. We see our mission here to tell Washington what is right about Iran. This piece is not really helpful in that regard." I thought, "Well, this is going to be interesting," but I was very lucky in that there was an inspection going on just at that time. The inspectors came down very hard on senior management regarding reporting. They concluded that the Political Section was reporting only good news about Iran when there might be some bad news out there, too. As a result, when I went back down to Shiraz after doing my Consular Section stint, I was able to report as I saw things. We did not have cable capability in Shiraz. We had to send all our stuff up to Teheran. The political counselor or Jack sometimes would sit on these things that we sent out for... In some cases, it was a few weeks, until the next time I came out. Jack and I would have an "Is the glass half full or is it half empty" conversation and then he would let it go. But the only reason he would was because of that inspection that occurred just at the time that I was coming up from Shiraz from the language training to work in the Consular Section.

Q: This was a carry over from when Kissinger and Nixon had gone to Iran. From what I gather, the order came out "Don't delve too deeply into the society. We'll get our confidential or internal information from the Shah's regime."

TOMSETH: Yes. It wasn't nearly so simple as a single conversation between Kissinger and the Shah. But basically, what had happened was, an agreement, in effect, that the embassy would not have any direct contacts with political dissidents, that SAVAK, the state security agency, would share all of the information that it had on dissidents with the station. That way, we would know all we needed to know about opposition, dissident political views in Iran.

Q: It was really incredible.

TOMSETH: It really was.

Q: This was a theme that comes out. One can obviously have the fact that one is misinformed or not very astute at doing that, but to deliberately cut off your right hand. That is what we usually have to look at to understand the opposition. If you don't, you are really asking for trouble, which we got.

TOMSETH: One of the consequences of that was that, in the Carter administration and particularly as the revolution got underway in Iran and we realized that we needed to have our own contacts with some of these people, because the policy for a number of years had been that we wouldn't and that we would rely upon SAVAK for information and political dissidents knew that and were very reluctant to have any contact with people from the American embassy or the consulate in Shiraz. They assumed that we were in bed with the state security agency.

Q: In Shiraz, besides the visa business, what were your responsibilities?

TOMSETH: There were basically three things. The visa function. I came out of my Consular Section in Teheran experience and this inspection with a view that we needed to do that in the most professional way possible.

The second thing was, we had in our consular district an American citizen community of probably 10 12,000 people. They were scattered across the consular district. They tended to be in clusters, but they were widely dispersed within this fairly large consular district. Again, that was one of the things that I left Teheran understanding was an important part of the worthat we needed to service that American citizen community. One of the things that I instituted was a traveling road show, that we would actually send people out on a circuit ride on a regular basis.

Q: Who were these Americans? What were they doing?

TOMSETH: They varied. In Khuzestan, which is sort of down in the southwest corner of Iran, they were oil people. In Bushir, they were building a nuclear power plant. In Bandarabas, they were mostly military related sorts of things. There was a small military group there, but there were Lockheed and various other defense contractors. Most of the Bell Helicopter people were in Isfahan. That was its own consular district that was basically just Isfahan. In Karmon, they were copper mining people. In Shiraz, you had some academics at the university, some medical people at the major hospital, some military people, Grumman, and what they called "technical advisory groups," but they were military people who ran the FS sales program in that particular area. So, it varied. Most of them were private sector. A lot of them were defense contractor or oil people. Some were academics.

Q: Did they cause problems? You think about Islamic society and oil or military people... They are Americans that are pretty unsophisticated running around with their motorbikes, beer, and girls. Did this cause a problem?

TOMSETH: No, we didn't have too many problems. It wasn't like my ambulance chasing days in Thailand when this judge advocate type and I ran around to courts and jails trying to save young GIs. I think part of that was the oil industry people, a lot of these people had a great deal of experience in the Middle East. They had worked in Saudi Arabia, in Iran, wherever. Then the companies themselves for their non executive white collar personnel, generally, they would have them work three weeks on, 10 days out. They would fly them back to Houston for their R&R. These guys knew it, so they did their honkeytonkying in Texas, not in Iran. The military people tended to be career types. They weren't fresh GIs. So, they tended to keep their nose clean.

My colleague in Isfahan had a lot more problem with the Bell Helicopter people. Bell Helicopter didn't do what the oil companies did. They were there for whatever their tour was. They tended to have a lot more of the traditional kinds of problems.

Q: That is held out as one of the contributing factors to how the Iranians... When they talk about Americans not fitting in, you hear about Bell Helicopter.

TOMSETH: I think it's more complex than that. We can talk about it if you want.

Q: Why don't we come to that as the time goes on? Did you get involved when the Carter administration came in ? Did this cause any change or not?

TOMSETH: There were several changes that occurred more or less simultaneously. One was the change of administration, but there was also a change of leadership in Teheran. Helms left. I personally always had a very good relationship with Helms. From my point of view, he was not my problem. It was much more Jack. Bill Sullivan came to replace him. I knew Sullivan from the time when I was in Bangkok and he was ambassador in Laos. Charlie Naas, who had been the country director for Iran, came out to be his DCM. Charlie was much more sympathetic to the idea of honest political reporting. The Carter administration's human rights policy tended to be an encouragement for that. So, in Shiraz, I think we felt a lot more comfortable in doing the sorts of things that we had been doing anyway in terms of reporting that had been difficult in terms of getting them through the pipeline to Washington.

It didn't make that much difference in terms of the willingness of people to open up. There was still a very widespread assumption that whatever was said to us was probably given back to SAVAK. But my personal approach to political reporting is to do a lot more listening than asking. I would spend a lot of time drinking tea and just listening to what people had to day, letting them determine the agenda of the conversation. In terms of time use, that may not be the most efficient way to go about it, but in the Iranian context, I found that that was a more effective way of getting at what was really on people's minds. It was just to let them tell me what they thought about things, whether or not it fit a preconceived agenda that I might have in mind. So, a lot of the reporting that I offered up on Shiraz was that sort of thing. It was based on these kinds of conversations, rather than going in to meet with a political party leader and asking questions from a menu of things for a half hour.

Q: How would you end up sitting with somebody and having a conversation?

TOMSETH: We had a national employee who actually was on the payroll of SAVAK, but he was a very social guy. He had worked for the consulate for a long, long time. Wherever we went, he knew lots of people. He would be an introduction to people. Then those people would be an introduction to more people and so it went.

Q: Was there a SAVAK man who would come around and say "What's cooking" or tell you? Was there an official contact with SAVAK?

TOMSETH: There was. He didn't come around, but I would go see the local head of SAVAK in Shiraz, Karmon, or wherever from time to time. They certainly knew what we were doing in terms of traveling. This national employee would tell them regularly. He would filhis reports.

Q: He was the equivalent to an announced SAVAK person or was it just that you all knew that he was?

TOMSETH: We knew it was and it was subsequently confirmed.

Q: How did you find the writ of the central government, the governors and all that you would make your normal calls on? Was it a centralized government?

TOMSETH: That was one of the interesting things. As I said a moment ago, Iran has a long tradition of regional centers that, depending on the political circumstances, have frequently enjoyed considerable autonomy from whatever place considered itself the capital of the country. Starting with Reza Shah, the Shah's father, and certainly pursued by the Shah himself, there was an attempt to centralize everything to the point where no important decision was made without the Shah's direct involvement in it himself. That is the way people in places like Shiraz often viewed these provincial governors, as an outside interloper to begin with. Besides that, they have no real authority. If something important has to be decided, it will be decided in Teheran. There was a great deal of resentment of that organizational structure. Many of these local notables' family history there is about as important as any place I have ever been. Some of the local notables in Shiraz knew very well the history of their families when not too many generations previously it was some great grandfather or great uncle who had been calling the shots, not somebody who fancied himself the Shah of Iran.

Q: Also, was there the attitude that Pahlavi, the Shahs, were basically Russian interlopers?

TOMSETH: Not Russian, but Reza Shah had been a non commissioned officer in the Cossack Brigade prior to World War I. Then when the Bolshevik Revolution came along and the Russians withdrew from that and the Cossack Brigade was incorporated into a national army, he became an officer and quickly rose to general. But a lot of these people, particularly if they had connections to the Khadjahr Dynasty, which he replaced, or were from these local families like the Khavamis in Shiraz, thought "This guy was just a peasant from Mozanaran Province. He is nobody in a social sense that we have to give very much respect to."

Q: Did you get involved at all in the huge celebration that the Shah had?

TOMSETH: That was in 1971. As it happened, one of those times that I was in Iran prior to being assigned there was just after he had crowned himself King of Kings, Light of the Aryans, and marked this 2,500 years of Iranian kingship. That was done at Taktijamshid Persepolis, just outside of Shiraz. So, when I got there in 1976, one of the de rigeur tourist stops was to go out there and go through the tents where the various heads of state had been put up.

Q: I thought we might stop at this point. We are reaching a very interesting stage. I would rather start fresh on this. We have talked a bit about what you've done in Shiraz and the social structure there. I would like to ask again early on, what was your impression of the White Revolution, whither Iran at that time, and get into the religious side and the real guts of whahappened, but also local students and all that.

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Today is May 27, 1999. Victor, what was your impression of the reforms that the Shah had been putting in place, the White Revolution and other reforms, from the Shiraz perspective?

TOMSETH: The original agenda had a relatively limited number of points. I think there may have been 14 to start with. Many of them were fairly basic to any developing society. One was to accelerate the spread of literacy. Another one was a land reform program. I think any political leader in a developing country out to pursue a program of modernization would have to address those kinds of things. In the initial years of the so called White Revolution, there was a lot of activity aimed at those kinds of things, with a great deal of support from the United States during the 1960s. Some of these things were fairly successful. The literacy campaign was one where Iran went from a situation in which barely 10 15% of the entire population was literate to one in which at least statistically they claimed by the mid 1970s that over half the population was literate. Certainly among the school age generation in Iran, the rate of literacy was a lot higher than that.

Land reform, too, brought about some fairly major change in rural areas of Iran. When I got there in early 1976, even these things that I think any political leader in a developing country would want to pursue had disruptive effects on Iranian society as well. In the area of literacy, for example, some of the things that came out of that was that you had, given the Iranian extended family situation where you often had three or even four generations of people living under the same roof, you could have and frequently did have a situation in which the parents might be illiterate and the children not only were literate, but were aspiring to higher education. That creates a kind of tension within the family setting without doubt.

Another thing that had happened as a consequence of this was to accelerate the process of urbanization. The best education, of course, was available in urban areas. So, you would get families who had been rural for generations when they had children who were suddenly part of this culture of literacy, they would want to see that they got the best education possible. That meant sending them off to the cities. The exposure of these people who had been totally conditioned by a very traditional rural environment in the big city, whether that was Teheran, Shiraz, or Isfahan (It didn't really matter that much.), could also be very destabilizing in terms of the social situation.

In the area of land reform, certainly the Shah didn't win any friends among the elite families that had been large landowners earlier. This family that I lived with in Shiraz was one of them. I remember one time the wife in this family complained bitterly to me that they were allowed to have only one village, that was all they were allowed to have under land reform, and could that possibly happen in the United States? Even more important than alienating the so called "Thousand Families" (Actually, there weren't 1,000 families in Iran. It was something less than that.), was the institution of Shia Islam had been a big landowner as well. The Olqaf was probably the single largest landowner in all of Iran. A lot of that agricultural property particularly was taken away in the course of land reform under the White Revolution. Additionally, many of the ulema, Shia clergymen, were also big landowners. Many of them lost much of their property as a consequence of land reform. Again, this important segment of Iranian society was alienated by that particular provision of the so called White Revolution. This was in circumstances where in Shia Islam, the very essence of the faith, is highly skeptical of any temporal power. There always had been a great deal of tension between the Persian monarchies on the one hand and the religious establishment on the other because of aspects of the Shia faith system. So, when you had land reform depriving powerful members of the Shia clergy of their land, that simply exacerbated this tension between the monarchy and the religious establishment.

But by the time I got to Iran in the mid 1970s, there had been additional points added onto this White Revolution. Some of those things were much less calculated towards the development process per se than the political system that the Shah was attempting to entrench in Iran, specifically a very powerful absolute monarchy. That also, depending on the segments of Iranian society, on balance tended to have an alienating effect much more than an effect of including people into the process that the Shah was attempting to implement in this so called White Revolution.

Q: Discontent is a very difficult thing to measure in the Foreign Service anywhere. You are never sure whether you just happen to be with a bunch of people who are grousing. You can go to the fanciest country clubs of the United States and end up talking about how they are ready for revolution or something. Were you able to get any feel for this? Were we able to report it, if so?

TOMSETH: In the two and a half years I spent in Shiraz, the political reporting that the consulate did was very much focused on this societal malaise that in significant part was a direct function of the nature of the regime. But an aspect of it is cultural as well. The Iranians tend to be very dour in their outlook and complainers and want to engage in all kinds of conspiracy theories. So, it was often difficult to separate the political mood from this cultural background noise that was there. But in the reporting that we did, there was a very heavy emphasis on the notion that the support for the regime might be a mile wide, but it was only a few inches deep and that if something better were to come along, that large portions of the population would have no hesitation in abandoning the regime for whatever that might be. Being able to detect that is not the same thing as predicting that in 1978 there will be a revolutionary movement in Iran that will result in the overthrow of this regime. Part of the difficulty in coming to that conclusion, that we are really on the brink of a revolution, is that the Shah had been around for a long time. He had been on the throne since 1941. He had been through a number of political crises during that period, all of which he had weathered. So, if you are a Foreign Service in the embassy in Teheran or one of these consulates in the Mofasole, and particularly if you are somebody like me, who was not an old Iranian hand, you're reluctant to predict Armageddon as just around the corner. But if there was a theme of the reporting that was coming out of the consulate during those two and a half years, it certainly was that there is a negative side to what is happening in Iran and that negative side could very well have political consequences at some point.

I think what distinguished that reporting was that very early on I got a lecture from mission management about the responsibility of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Iran to report the good news because there were plenty of others who were prepared to report the bad news. Just through the happenstance of fate, if you will, I found myself in a position where, in fact, I could (and two vice consuls who were there with me) report on negative aspects of what was going on. As the revolution then began to build in 1978, in Washington and Teheran, just by virtue that that reporting was a different kind of message than had been coming out of the embassy tended to catch the attention of some people.

Q: I am told that another element in the Iranian equation are the bazaaris, the small merchants. What was their role from your Shiraz perspective?

TOMSETH: Again, at the point I arrived, the bazaari class were a bunch of very unhappy campers. Again, as part of this White Revolutionary process, some of the additional points that had been added onto that in the previous several years struck very much at the interests of the bazaaris. There was a lot of focus on building up state enterprises and building a kind of economic structure that was very non traditional. I wouldn't say it was Western, but the theory was that it was patterned on what had happened in the developed world rather than the traditional small trading kind of activity that typified the bazaar in Iran.

Additionally, a lot of these people tended to be traditional in their adherence to Iranian culture. That meant that they were pious, that they gave money to the local mosque, that they didn't fly off to Paris as the glitterati in Teheran or the larger cities did to buy their underwear, and they tended to look upon those people who lived in Sheneran and the upper part of Teheran or in areas of these provincial cities where the modernizing elite tended to congregate as just about as foreign as all of the foreigners who had been brought into Iran as part of the effort to modernize Iran rapidly, particularly after the oil price increase of the early 1970s. This is why I said the other day that even in a place like Isfahan where you had this large number of Bell Helicopter and ancillary activities to that operation, a large number of expatriates who were not necessarily the best representatives of their own societies, that wasn't all there was to the story. Yes, they were a group of foreigners that engaged in behavior that often was offensive to this very traditional component of Iranian society, but there were also Iranians who were, in effect, foreigners in the midst of their own society. Often, the focus of these traditional elements in Iranian society tended to be much more on that Iranian elite than the foreigners in their midst. They could see this elite as really the cause of aspects of things that were happening that they didn't like and that the foreigners, in effect, were simply the symptoms. They weren't necessarily the cause of it.

Q: How about contact with them?

TOMSETH: As I said the other day, getting people to express their real feelings was always difficult in Iran because of the assumption that whatever might be said to somebody from the consulate would go via a very direct pipeline to SAVAK, the state security organization. They had some reason to believe that, not that I or my American colleagues were going to report on them, but there were Iranian employees in the consulate who were on SAVAK's payroll, so they had to be careful.

But being in Shiraz was an advantage in a way and particularly because we made a practice of traveling extensively within the consular district. Hardly a week went by when one or another of the three Americans that were assigned there were not on the road somewhere else in the consular district. Again, through one of these local employees, particularly even though he was on SAVAK's payroll, he was a very gregarious person who had been with the consulate for a long, long time and knew a lot of people, and he did provide at least an entree to elements of society that people in the embassy in Teheran had much more difficulty penetrating. I think, over time particularly, that we were able to get to know some of these guys and that some of them would open up a bit. You would hear their stories. A lot of the reporting that we did out of Teheran was just that, the stories of people without always identifying who they were other than that "A bazaari or a group of bazaaris that we have seen over the past month are saying these sorts of things." Particularly as things began to go south in 1978, that kind of reporting captured an audience in Washington that increasingly began to doubt that the good news that the embassy tended to focus on was necessarily the right story about what was happening in Iran.

Q: What about SAVAK? It was more than just the secret police, wasn't it? It was the police, wasn't it?

TOMSETH: No. There was a police force that had several different branches. SAVAK is an Iranian acronym that stands for the "Sasmani Italat Kayshfar," the "State Security and Intelligence Organization." That is basically what they were. They were the secret police and a kind of domestic CIA.

Q: Did you have a feeling that our CIA representation in Teheran was kind of in bed with the SAVAK? Were you able to report on the concern of the people where you were about the SAVAK?

TOMSETH: Yes, that was not a problem, reporting on what people were saying about SAVAK. We didn't have any source of information about what went on. SAVAK had arrest powers. They could arrest people. We didn't have a source of information that would give us any kind of accurate picture of what went on in SAVAK detention facilities, although you would hear from people who said they had been in one or they knew somebody who had been in one about what they claimed went on. But reporting that sort of thing was not a problem.

In terms of the Agency being in bed with SAVAK, yes, they were, as a matter of national policy. That was something that had not been decided by the station or even the Agency, but rather, as my military friends like to call them, national command authorities, including the head of the Agency, no doubt, but certainly involving the Secretary of State and the president, the White House.

Q: Did you have much contact with the reporting officers at the embassy?

TOMSETH: Yes. Because we did not have a telegraphic capability in Shiraz, Tabriz, or Isfahan, everything that we reported was an airgram or a memorandum of conversation. Those all had to be sent through the embassy in Teheran. The Political Section was the conduit through which they went. Again, after that spring of 1976 inspection that occurred just as I was arriving in Iran, the Political Section was not inclined to try to hold those things up. It went to the next level up. After that inspection, nothing that I or my colleagues in Shiraz wrote in the time that we were there was ever deep sixed. It might be held until the next time I could come up to Teheran and, as I think I described the other day, the DCM and I had our "Is the glass half full or is the glass half empty" conversation. But then they would go. Obviously, there was a disagreement between the Political Section and the consulate in terms of what we were saying about how things were and what they were saying.

Just to give you an example, one of the things that had happened just before I got to Iran was the Shah had created a party. This was his latest iteration of a number of things he had done. At one point, he had created two political parties and then there had been no political parties. Then, just before I got there, there was the creation of a political party. It was through this political party that day to day government was to take place. It was a [majlis], a parliament. Everybody immediately became a member of this party. The Political Section in Teheran took this seriously and regularly reported on the activities of the Rastacris Party. Sitting in our little provincial abode down in Shiraz, we didn't take it seriously. It was just the most recent manifestation of the Shah's attempt to manipulate the political process and it didn't have any real meaning in terms of what was happening politically within the country at large. So, there was a debate between the Political Section and the consulate about the role of the Rastacris Party over a couple of years until the revolution really got underway in 1978.

Q: That reminds me of when I was consul general at about the same time in Naples. We used to get requests down to find out what the people down there thought about the latest maneuvers in Rome and they couldn't have cared less. It was all the CDU and the ministers changing things and nothing changed. I think the Italians had a very clear eye, certainly down in Naples, about what went on, but we were reporting in great detail this exquisite minuet in Rome.

I would think there would be some problems within the embassy Political Section that you might be picking up. The idea of an embassy saying, "Well, the newspaper is going to report all the bad things, so we have to balance it out by reporting all the good things" is a recipe for disaster. Supposedly, nobody is getting these things coming in from two frontals balancing them off. We are trained observers who are supposed to be reporting things as they are rather than trying to create a balance.

TOMSETH: Yes. Well, there was. It actually went back several years before I got there. One of the times that I had been to Iran prior to actually being assigned there was in 1971. At that point, there was a relatively junior officer in the Political Section, Stanley Escudero, who was a very good Persian speaker and traveled extensively around the country. I think he had a view which ran contrary to dogma in the embassy. I remember talking to him in the fall of 1971 when I was there. He was very frustrated about his inability to get what he was seeing and hearing as he moved about the country into the embassy's political reporting.

When I got there in 1976, there were three State Department officers in the Political Section, one of whom was on his second tour. He had been there in the 1960s. I think a lot of what he saw going on in Iran he found rather troubling, but he was not able to get that through the political counselor. The other person was a mid level officer, more junior than the person on the second tour. He had gone through Persian language training the year before I did, but like me had no particular background in the area. He was an enthusiast. He was one of these people who took the Rastacris Party very seriously. So, intellectually, he didn't have any trouble with this notion that there was good news to report from Iran.

Q: You were in Shiraz until when?

TOMSETH: Until February of 1979, just shortly after the Shah had departed and Khomeini had returned to Iran immediately from Paris. He had been in Iraq for many, many years prior to being kicked out of there in mid 1978 and going to Paris.

Q: Part of the phenomenon of Khomeini coming back was the distribution of cassette tapes, exactly the kind we're recording this on, of his sermons. Was this something that you were seeing in Shiraz? Was this something that was raising our concerns?

TOMSETH: Well, it was no secret about how he was getting his message across to the populace in Iran. It was through cassette recordings. He would give these sermons or homilies first from Nadjeff in Iraq, where he was, and then Paris. Somebody would bring one back and copies of it were made and they went everywhere. It was 20 years in advance of where we are with the Internet and e mail today. But it was no secret that SAVAK knew that this was happening, the embassy knew that it was happening, but there was nothing anybody could really do about it. It proves a lie to George Orwell, if you will, that these technologies, rather than enslaving people, which is what Orwell worried so much about, really have an ability to set people free. Whatever you may think about the regime in Iran, in a way, this revolution was a very liberating experience for the vast majority of people. It gave them an opportunity that they had not had for decades to really engage in political self expression, if you will.

Q: Were we able to monitor the effect of these things in Shiraz?

TOMSETH: I think what no one did a very good job of prior to the beginning of 1978 was gauging the effect that these messages from Khomeini were having within society at large. To pass these things around was potentially a criminal offense. I mean, anyone caught doing it was subject to arrest by the police or by SAVAK and winding up in jail. So, one of the stops on the distribution route certainly was not the consulate or the embassy in Teheran. But you did hear snippets of this sort of thing. You would hear that Khomeini in his last sermon from Nadjeff had said this or said that. It was going around. We were certainly aware that there was something out there, but we in the consulate and the embassy, wherever, and SAVAK, too, for that matter, really had great difficulty coming to grips with the impact that these messages were having on society at large. That was only manifested when in early 1978 there began to be a series of overt demonstrations, demonstrations in the street, which were greeted, met with force on the part of the regime. There were inevitably casualties of one sort of another. Very quickly in 1978, you got into this cycle of demonstration, the demonstration being put down by force, a number of people being hurt or killed, and a 40 day period of mourning at the end of which there would be another demonstration maybe not even in the same city. The first one of these was in Qom, which is about 100 miles from Teheran and a religious center. But the next one was in Tabriz, clear up in northwestern Iran. They occurred in Isfahan, Meshed, Khorasan in northeastern Iran, and ultimately even in Shiraz, which had a reputation of being the most laid back of these provincial centers. That cycle built in intensity throughout 1978. At that point, yes, it was possible to begin to measure in some quantifiable way the impact that these sermons and homilies that were coming back via cassette recording were having on the society at large. But at that point, it was almost too late. Certainly by the summer of 1978, the phenomenon had taken on a life of its own. I think even the Shah began to recognize that and realized that the only way that it could be stopped would be with massive casualties throughout Iranian society and, for whatever reasons, he was not prepared to inflict that on his country. I think there are a variety of reasons.

Q: We have taken bits and pieces. You left in early 1979 to go up to Teheran. There was this revolution going on. How did we observe it from Shiraz, not the ebb and flow, but the flow of this revolution?

TOMSETH: In the course of 1978, I think the reporting that the consulate did tended to be very much the same kind of reporting that we had been doing for the previous year and a half, which was very much observation of what's going on in southern Iran in terms of this building revolutionary phenomenon. There was no single center for this revolution. You had this cyclical pattern of 40 days of mourning after an event in which people had been killed and injured, but you never knew what place the next manifestation was going to burst out. That made it difficult, I think, for the embassy and certainly for a consulate to describe this as a nationalist phenomenon. It was kind of like the six blind men describing an elephant. You've got a hold of your part of the elephant, but saying something meaningful about the animal as a whole was always very difficult. It was only in the latter stages of the year that the embassy began to try to come to grips with that based upon reporting that it was getting out of the consulates, although I have to say that the vast bulk of that reporting tended to come from Shiraz. There was almost none from Isfahan and relatively little from Tabriz, unless something particular happened, and then they would report on that.

They were being prodded by Washington on this. The Iran desk at that point was headed by Henry Precht, who had been in the embassy prior to going back to Washington. Then Henry had taken Charlie Naas' place when Charlie had come out in 1977 to be deputy chief of mission. Henry had been one of those people when I first got to Iran in 1976 who had some doubts about what was going on. When I had written up my experiences as a language student in Shiraz, he was one of the people in the embassy who championed that sort of thing. In a staff meeting, he actually argued on behalf of the embassy sending that in as a report. Throughout 1978, Henry, from his position as country director, was pushing the embassy to try to come to grips with this phenomenon. I think certainly by the summer of 1978, Henry had come to the conclusion that, well, 38 years of success notwithstanding, maybe this time the Shah wasn't going to make it. It was a couple more months before the embassy, Bill Sullivan, the ambassador, came to that same conclusion. But by late in the year, the embassy had reached that conclusion and was desperately trying to come to grips with the phenomenon on a country wide basis and to anticipate, if the Shah goes, what's next, what happens, what kind of a situation are we going to be confronted with? What does that mean for U.S. policy? What does it mean for the relations with the United States?

Q: I would think that two of the most critical elements would be the ones that you almost by definition would be excluded from. One would be the military and the other would be the mullahs. When you're looking at revolution in a religious country, where religion obviously is playing a major role, was there a mullah movement that we could discern or was this just general repugnance on the religious part of the Shah?

TOMSETH: There were all kinds of mullahs. My language teacher in Shiraz, her father was the Imai Jome. He was the senior mullah in Shiraz, the person who led the Friday prayer at the most prominent mosque. I didn't have any difficulty seeing him and talking to him about all sorts of things. He was a relatively enlightened person and not necessarily a toadie of the Shah, but somebody who had a broader world view than many of these people. The more common kind of mullah though was somebody who tended to see the outside world and certainly the United States in vernegative terms. Even if you could get one of these people to agree that the phenomenon of Americans in Iran was really a symptom of something more fundamental and their problem was with that fundamental issue more than the United States, there wasn't much inclination to want to talk to Americans. The one aspect that helped us out a bit in this regard was that in Islam, of course, the clergy marries. The biology being what it is, roughly half of the children were males. Mullahs no less than anybody else didn't want their sons going into the army. So, a lot of them were our consular customers for visas for their children. We used this actually to gain some kind of access to people who otherwise would not be very willing to talk to people from the consulate. Now, it was difficult to get into a discussion of "And by the way, what are you telling your parishioners about the Shah," but it was possible to sit down with them and have a cup of tea and sort of talk about things in general. So, to a degree, we had some access to these people, but I would be the first to admit that it was difficult and it tended to be rather superficial.

The Iranian military was a little bit different. The government as a policy had a general no fraternization with foreigners approach. But there were a few relatively senior officers who were given dispensation from that policy. We could talk to them. They weren't necessarily a very good source about what people in the trenches thought and particularly what their draftees thought. But we did have scattered here and there the U.S. military advisory teams. They often worked with contractors on specific weapons systems or other kinds of military equipment that we were selling to the Iranians and training people. A lot of the trainees were non commissioned officers, draftees. Through these American military advisory teams, one of which was in Shiraz and right across the street from the consulate, and through the contractors, we could often get a little bit of a picture of what the people that they were dealing with, who tended to be much lower ranking and in some cases were draftees, were talking about. So, we got a little bit of a picture of that, but it was not easy.

Q: Did you have the feeling that in many ways the Iranian students who wanted visas to go to the United States were equivalent to our draft protestors in the United States during the Vietnam War? In other words, was it education that was driving them or was it just to get the hell out of Iran?

TOMSETH: Well, it was to stay out of the army. Being in the army in Iran up to that point had not been particularly onerous. They hadn't fought any wars since the 19th century. Maybe there was some skirmishing in the early 20th, but... It was a couple of years of taking orders from somebody you might not like very much and doing things that most Iranians didn't find particularly useful. There was great cynicism about the military among the population in general. Most people just didn't want to serve in it.

Q: That reminds me of when I was in Greece. This was the attitude of the wealthy Greeks.

TOMSETH: It wasn't just the wealthy in Iran. It was anybody who could get out of it used whatever resources he had available to get out of it. Again, with the boom in income fueled by oil wealth in the 1970s, more and more people were able to get out of it. Sending your male children abroad to study was a popular way of doing so.

Q: Were they going to essentially good schools or was it the equivalent of second rate? What was your impression?

TOMSETH: The Iranians had been coming to school in the United States for a long time, certainly since the end of World War II. Initially, they tended to be exclusively the children of the elite. Often, they wound up at the best universities in the United States. I remember, when I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, there were a number of Iranians there. They were certainly getting fine educations. But by the early 1970s when you had tens of thousands going every year, the vast majority of those were going to places that, if you had any kind of vital sign, you could get accepted to these schools. Many of them were dependent upon foreign students. If they didn't have foreign students, they would not have survived.

Q: How did you see the actual developments? Was it pretty apparent at a certain point that the Shah wasn't going to stop this?

TOMSETH: In late August and early September of 1978, there were a couple of incidents that for me were convincing that this wasn't going to stop. One was a theater fire in Abadan, which is down on the Persian Gulf. It's where the Iranian National Oil Company was headquartered. To this day, I'm not aware of any evidence that proves conclusively one way or another what that theater fire was all about. But it was clear that the exit doors were locked. A lot of people were trapped inside. The death toll on that was quite high. Immediately, rumors started circulating that this was an act perpetrated by the regime. Then in early September in Teheran, there was a demonstration in one of the city squares where the military moved in and started firing on people. In fact, it was alleged that they were firing from helicopters on the crowd. Several people were killed. Again, if they were being shot at from helicopters, I would have thought that the death toll would be much higher than it in fact it was. (End of tape)

This Jalay Square incident in Teheran... It didn't really matter whether one person was killed or one thousand were killed. In effect, they were martyrs and the military had been directly involved in this. This was not police action against the crowed, but military action against it. Again, the reactioand this time it was almost on a national scale; there were demonstrations almost everywhere in Iran against what had happened in Jalay Square... With these two things happening in rapid succession, the conclusion that I came to in Shiraz was that this regime was not going to make it, that the Shah simply had lost so much credibility and the military had lost credibility. At the same time, it was clear that the regime was not prepared in these demonstrations that popped up all around the country in the wake of Jalay Square, the military was not prepared to put those down with crushing force. To me, the way seemed clear that there was just going to be more and more of this. Each time that it happened, the regime was going to find itself in a weaker and weaker position. On the basis of that conclusion, I went to the embassy... We had 4,000 plus Americans in the consular district. I said, I think it's time that we start telling these people that we don't see any improvement in the situation and that they need to come to conclusions either institutionally through a company or individually if they were not, about whether or not they wanted to continue in Iran in circumstances where the outlook was for continuing deterioration in the situation. The consul general agreed with that approach.

Q: Who was that?

TOMSETH: Lew Gelps. The security officer agreed with that. But Bill Sullivan (And at the time I could understand intellectually where he was coming from. Subsequently, I developed a lot more sympathy for where he was coming from.) felt that if the U.S. mission went out officially to businesses and the American community generally and said, "You need to start thinking about packing your bags," that would set off a phenomenon itself that would only spiral downward and contribute to what was happening politically. So, he would not agree to taking that as an official approach. But what he did was turn a blind eye to what we did unofficially. I and the two vice consuls started telling people, "Look, here is what U.S. mission policy is, but I am going to tell you how I personally see this situation and you can draw your own conclusion." Over the next couple of months, we circulated around the consular district and spread that message.

The result of that was that for the companies, the oil companies, Lockheed, Grumman, and people like that who had to have fairly substantial presences in the district, that they for the most part started removing dependents. Some of them even began to cut down their staff personnel, to start looking at who was really essential to their operation. That made a great difference in early 1979 and in February of '79 particularly when the Shah's regime collapsed and this new revolutionary government came into place. We didn't have 4,000 plus Americans in the consular district anymore. We had a few hundred.

Q: Where the other consulates doing the same?

TOMSETH: To a degree, I think. In Tabriz, there were far fewer Americans. Isfahan had a lot more. The Isfahan consular district basically was two provinces, Isfahan and Gazed. Almost all of the Americans were concentrated in and around Isfahan City itself. In late 1978 and early 1979, the numbers of people there went down as well. In percentage terms, this was probably less than in the Shiraz consular district, which was essentially the southern 40% of Iran.

Q: How about the leaders of the American business community? We're really talking about American corporations which had defense or some other type contract. I suppose they had their own political estimates, too: checking with the embassy maybe below the embassy, what is really going on, that type of thing.

TOMSETH: I think it was, in general, much more true of the companies operating in the oil sector than some of the defense contractors. Those companies had lots of experience in Iran and in the area.

Q: Well, they had been around the block and been through a number of things in 1957 or 1958 in Iraq.

TOMSETH: Yes. Also, those companies tended to have their country headquarters not in Teheran, but in the oil area, in Khuzestan Province basically, either in Afwaz or in Abadan.

Q: Were you in Shiraz when the Shah left?

TOMSETH: Yes.

With regard to the American community, I should add one other point. In December of that year, in the Islamic calendar, Muharram fell in late November/early December that year. Ashiraz is sort of the big day for Shia Islam.

Q: This is when they go around beating themselves and yelling and all that.

TOMSETH: The martyrdom of Ali. I think that fell on December fifth or sixth of that year. The certitude was that there would be massive demonstrations all over Iran on Ashiraz. There was concern that these demonstrations might erupt into something that would be focused on the American community. Washington, again, I think, in part because of Henry Precht's prodding, actually directed the embassy a few days in advance of this to have an authorized departure, to allow dependents who wanted to leave to leave. The mission management didn't want to do that, but when Washington told them they had to, they didn't have any choice in it. A lot of the U.S. government dependents chose to leave on that occasion. That was also a very clear signal to the private sector Americans who were there. That prompted them to sort of redouble their thinking about whether or not they needed dependents around and contributed to the departure of a large portion of this American community in Iran, which may have been 50,000 at one point. In any event, my wife and two children were among those who departed. So, we were planning on going home for Christmas that year anyway. When they left, I said, "Well, I'll catch up with you at Christmas."

In the meantime, Ambassador Sullivan probably in early November had also come to the conclusion that the regime wasn't going to make it. He was directing an effort in the mission to start thinking about life after the Shah. One thing that he did at that point was, he asked me if I would be interested in coming up to Teheran after the first of the year to be political counselor on the theory that I had in my time in Shiraz a skeptic about the regime and also was one of a relatively small number of decent Persian speakers in the embassy. One of the things that they had found out as they began to change the policy about contacts was that many dissidents weren't English speakers. So, he wanted to think in terms of building a cadre of people in the embassy who presumably could relate to whatever came after and could speak to them in their language. So, he had asked me in November if I would be willing to do that. I didn't have to think very long to say "Yes." So, the idea was that I was going to go home at Christmas, come back after the first of the year and, in fact, start closing down the consulate and move up to Teheran. basically, that is what I did. I joined my family in Oregon for the holidays and came back through Washington right after New Year's for a little bit of consultations before heading back to Teheran.

Q: What were you getting from the desk when you went back before going to close the post as far as talking to... The country director was Henry Precht, wasn't it?

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: What were you getting from him? He was seeing both what the CIA was saying and...

TOMSETH: As I recall, the most useful information that we were getting via the desk (And by late 1978, a task force had been set up. This was no longer just a desk phenomenon.) was information abut the interplay of forces in Washington: who was doing what, who wasn't doing anything, and who favored one course as opposed to something else. There was a lot of toing and froing in that sense going on in Washington in late 1978. That leads up to this rather interesting development in early January that I started to tell you about.

When I came through Washington right after New Year's, Sullivan, who, as I said, had concluded that the Shah wasn't going to make it and that we needed to start preparing for whatever came after, one of the things that he had been pushing was the idea that we need to set up some kind of contact with Khomeini, who by this point was in Paris. By the first of the year, he had convinced Vance that this should be done. Vance had tapped Ted Elliott, who had just retired. He had been ambassador in Afghanistan and had served in Iran. He was to be the Department's special envoy to go off to Paris to meet with Khomeini. Among the entourage in Paris was a guy named Ibrahim Yazdi, who actually was an American citizen or permanent resident. Through him, this had been set up. In any event, when I showed up in Washington, I was asked if I would join Elliott to go to Paris on this mission. So, I got my ticket. We were literally within a couple of hours of heading for Dulles Airport to fly off to Paris when Carter, who was then in Guadeloupe (I guess this was in the days before the G7. They had a G4 and they were meeting down there.) and Zbigniew Brzezinski was with him. Brzezinski had been one of these people who had argued that, no, the Shah isn't going down. All he needs is strong backing from the U.S. and he'll pull through. Vance had already cleared this mission to Paris with Carter, but Brzezinski convinced Carter to change his mind. So, word came back from Guadeloupe that we were not going to Paris, so rather than fly off and meet Khomeini, I got on the plane and went back to Teheran and down to Shiraz and proceeded to close down the consulate and get ready to move up to Teheran.

Would it have made any difference? That is questionable, but I think very clearly, we missed an opportunity to open up a channel of communication. The failure to do that was very much a phenomenon of Washington not really having a policy on how we were going to approach this situation in Iran. It really depended on the day or even the hour of the day what we were going to do. That continued right up to the end.

Q: Also, the fact that we didn't do this... I have just been rereading some of the things that Bruce Laingen was saying... One of the things that led to your hostage situation was the perception from the rulers in Iran, is the United States going to try to reinsert the Shah? In other words, rather than our saying, "Okay, this has happened and we accept it?" The very fact that we didn't try to talk to Khomeini was maybe a minor piece, but it left that endowed about were we going to accept this.

TOMSETH: I think that is absolutely true. The failure to open up that channel of communication, whether or not we would have been able to communicate very effectively through it is another issue, but the failure to even open it up was a very serious lacuna as we proceeded in the course of 1979, tried to convince this new regime that we accepted what had happened and that what we were interested in doing was building a new kind of relationship with Iran, one that was based upon what had happened in Iran and not to try to go back to the status quo, which when we get to November of 1979 we can talk about. I think that sort of led this one student group to act as they did.

Q: When you went back, you actually shut down the post?

TOMSETH: Yes. I think we closed the consulate for business by the end of January and then began the process of packing up everything and closing down finally. I was supposed to go up to Teheran on February 10th. On the evening of the ninth, the tape that you referred to (It actually was a video tape of Khomeini's return.) sort of set off the final act. Khomeini had come back on the first or second of February, as I recall. He had decreed a provisional revolutionary government. The government that the Shah had left behind when he left on the 19th or 20th of January was still in place. That night (There was a small air force installation right in the middle of Teheran.), a group of non commissioned officers were watching this tape of Khomeini's return to Teheran. A group of officers came into the room and told them to shut it off. A fight ensued. That set off a period of three or four days of fighting in Teheran and in other cities around Iran that ended with the Shah's last government folding its tent and the provisional revolutionary government being very clearly the only government in Iran.

Iran Air was not flying at that time. One of the tactics of the anti Shah forces in late 1978 and early 1979 was to shut down all sorts of things (electricity, telecommunications) and Iran Air was one of them. So, the way I was supposed to get from Shiraz up to Teheran was, one of the U.S. Air Force C 12s which were parked at Doshantapay... This fight broke out at Doshantapay on the night of February ninth and by the morning of the 10th, there was no way that anybody from the embassy was going to be able to get the plane and come down to Shiraz and pick me up. So, I wound up staying down there for about another week, which in one sense was fortuitous. On the 14th of February, there was an attack on the embassy in Teheran. I otherwise would have been there. I missed that as a consequence of not being able to get out as scheduled.

Q: I'd like to go back to a couple of things. All these students going to the United States... Did you have problems of the students coming back with American wives and having children and not being able to get out of the country?

TOMSETH: Well, that hadn't been a phenomenon long before the revolution ever.

Q: This is just a pure consular problem.

TOMSETH: Right. I don't recall that there was any increase in those kinds of problems as a result of developments in the course of 1978. We did have a case of that sort pop up every once in a while. The American female spouse of an Iranian when she came back to Iran with her husband was regarded as an Iranian citizen. Her American citizenship was not recognized. Under Iranian law, no female could travel abroad without the written permission of either her spouse or parent or a male guardian of some sort. That applied to the children as well. So, we did have these "Not Without My Daughter" cases that arose. There weren't a lot of them, but there was some frequency.

Q: Were you able to work something out?

TOMSETH: Well, more often than not, yes. There were a few cases in which people left illegally. We would give them an American passport and they would then make their own arrangements to get out of Dodge, as it were.

Q: Iran was in turmoil. You have this pressure of all classes trying to get particularly their sons out of the place. This might have been quite a blow to the people who just wanted to get their sons out. Here was a source of visas that you were shutting down.

TOMSETH: That's right.

Q: How did this work? Would you find yourself issuing a hell of a lot of visas in a hurry?

TOMSETH: I don't think we were issuing, as long as we were issuing visas, any more or less than we ever had, but there was a great deal of consternation in Shiraz and in the consular district that this consulate was not going to be operating at least for a while and how were they going to get their visas?

Q: Were you getting people who were from the wealthier classes, the ones more identified with the Shah saying, "You're deserting us" and that sort of thing?

TOMSETH: Yes, although, I think, that phenomenon was much stronger in Teheran than any of the provincial cities. There was by the end of 1978 a very substantial exodus of people from Iran. I think one of the most telling signs that the end was near was when I came through Washington right after the first of the year in 1979, the Iranian military had marshaled all of its air assets to start flying their families out. Plane after plane was arriving at Andrews Air Force Base with the dependents of senior Iranian military officers on board.

Q: When did you get up to Teheran then?

TOMSETH: A couple of days after the 14th. Iran Air began flying again and I was able to get a commercial flight.

Q: Could you have driven up or was this considered dangerous?

TOMSETH: It was a possibility, but generally regarded as probably not the best idea.

Q: What was the state of the embassy when you arrived up there to your new job?

TOMSETH: Uninhabitable. What had happened on the 14th was... The embassy was on a large compound, almost a city block. By that point in the 1970s, it was largely surrounded by high rise buildings. So, people had gotten into these buildings and began firing into the embassy compound. A firefight went on for a couple of hours before the last group of people in the main chancery building surrendered and were taken out of the building by these armed people who carried out the attack. As it turned out, there were probably three different groups involved in the attack. They had only very loosely coordinated with one another. In fact, in purely political ideological terms, a couple of the groups were very much at odds with one another, but were able to cooperate on this attack on the embassy. There were six people killed in that attack, none of the American staff, but a couple of FSNs (Foreign Service nationals) and a couple of Iranian contract personnel, the cleaning crew who were on the premises, and a couple of the attackers, who almost certainly were shot by Marines as they retreated from the perimeter of this compound into the main chancery building, something we never admitted to.

Q: Yes. I've never heard that before.

TOMSETH: But the evidence suggests that they were not killed in a crossfire, but were probably shot by Marines defending themselves. In any event, the building had been shot up. In the chancery building itself, there was a great deal of tear gas that had been put down as the Marines retreated to the basement to the first floor to the second floor where the communications vault was. That was the last thing that went down. Virtually all of the files had been destroyed or if they had not been destroyed, an effort was made to go into the building and get them out and out of the country. So, we were operating... The Consular Section actually was in another building off the compound several blocks away. That was shut down. So, we were not issuing any visas in Teheran. Not only had the consulates been shut down, but this operation in Teheran that had been issuing over 100,000 visas a year was also shut down. Needless to say, that caused a great deal of consternation in Teheran.

Security on the compound was actually being provided by these three groups that had shot their way into the embassy on the 14th. That was part of the deal that was worked out when this same Ibrahim Yazdi, who by that point was foreign minister, had sort of rushed to the embassy in response to frantic phone calls from the embassy and had negotiated a settlement with these groups whereby they released everybody they had taken captive, but then were left on the compound to provide security for the compound. So, when I got there, the tasks at hand were to try to put some kind of embassy operation back together, to deal with this so called security force, which as I said was actually three different groups which immediately started feuding with one another, and to try to deal with all of the material possessions that had been left behind by the American community in Teheran, which was several thousand (probably seven or eight thousand) people first when Khomeini had come back and then this fighting that had resulted in the collapse of the Shah's regime. Just prior to the 14th, there had been an airlift organized by the embassy, the State Department, to get as many people as wanted to leave out of the country. Many people had literally gotten up from their breakfast and gone to the airport to get on one of these flights. So, there were apartments all over the city that had to be sought out, goods removed and packed up. People had abandoned their cars at the embassy. Those had to be disposed of. They had turned their pets loose on the compound. Something had to be done about them. So there were all these housekeeping activities that had to be taken care of. One of the decisions that Washington had made in the aftermath of the attack was that people had been so traumatized by the experience that the best thing to do would be to get as many people out of there as possible and to replace them, initially with TDY (temporary duty) personnel and ultimately with permanent replacements. So, we had just a relatively small cadre of people left over from the old mission, a constantly rotating stream of people coming in on temporary duty for a week or two at a time, trying to do all this housekeeping work, dealing with this security force that we were fearful might start shooting at one another at any point, and to try to get some kind of embassy operation going again. My role as the new political counselor was to try to organize the political reporting in the midst of all of this when we couldn't get into the chancery because of the tear gas. We had no records. We had no communications other than very rudimentary temporary communications that were set up. The volume that that could handle was very minimal.

Q: The ambassador was still Sullivan?

TOMSETH: Bill Sullivan was still there. He stayed until about the middle of April.

Q: How was he reacting to all of this?

TOMSETH: Superbly. He had had great difficulty with the State Department, Warren Christopher in particular. He came back in April of 1979 and resigned in the midst of great bitterness and went on to do other things. But as a leader in those circumstances, he was a rock during that couple of months that he remained after all this had happened.

Q: What was the problem with Warren Christopher, who was Deputy Secretary of State?

TOMSETH: Well, Christopher, in effect, had become the Iran Desk officer in the latter stages of 1978 and early 1979. I think Sullivan's view, rightly or wrongly (I'm not really in a position to judge.), was that Christopher was very much a part of this gang in Washington that couldn't make up its mind about anything having to do with Iran. A lot of the business that was conducted between the embassy and Washington in the final stages of this was done over the secure phone. It was not via cable or anything in the written record. I understand that there were a number of discussions that Sullivan and Christopher had over the secure phone that were very acrimonious.

Q: When you arrived there, all this activity was going on, but it sounds like a real chaotic situation. What sort of government were you dealing with? How were you organizing your political reporting? What was happening?

TOMSETH: Khomeini while he was still in Paris had actually named a prime minister, a fellow named Mehdi Bazargan, who was a figure out of the 1950s and 1960s and had been in Iran most of that time. He had not gone into exile. Bazargan actually was a Western trained engineer, not in the West, but in the Western mode. He was fairly open to the idea of working with us. He had appointed a number of people that also were relatively easy to deal with. This fellow, Ibrahim Yazdi, who had spent many, many years in the United States, was the foreign minister. There was a deputy prime minister named Amir Antazam, with whom we also had a lot of dealings, who was very easy to deal with, to communicate with. The big problem was that this was a government that was in charge of very little in a meaningful sense and was constantly being undercut by Khomeini himself. The government's principal rival was a whole plethora of so called revolutionary committees. There were revolutionary committees everywhere. These were groups of people who were largely self appointed. They often were based on a local mosque. They did everything. They manned the checkpoints, which were all around the town. They insinuated themselves into government ministries. They controlled specific areas of geography around the city and, indeed, around the country. There were revolutionary committees in other cities as well. So, the provisional government was constantly trying to deal not only with embassies like us and sovereign powers, but the domestic sovereign powers as well, these revolutionary committees. What happened over the next nine months or so was that the authority of the provisional government steadily eroded. The power of these revolutionary committees, at least a number of them, increased. The result was that nobody was in charge and everybody was in charge. So, getting any kind of a decision was extremely difficult. In terms of how you get a political section back in operation in those circumstances, I must say, it was a challenge. Part of the challenge was that we didn't want to just focus on the government. Our feeling was, that was part of how we got into this mess in the first place, dealing only with the government, but to try and reach out to others, to these revolutionary committees, to the mullahs who often were very influential people in the committees. Again, it wasn't easy. There was a great deal of mistrust. The feeling on the part of many of these people was that whatever we might be saying, the U.S. was the embassy, that it was difficult to distinguish, and the U.S. embassy was the manifestation of the enemy in Iran, that there really wasn't any difference between the U.S. government and the Shah.

Q: History always weighs heavily on us. You immediately go scurrying back and look at the Bolshevik Revolution. You would have been looking for, my god, when are the communists going to come up and seize. This was in the middle of the Cold War. Was this in your minds? Were we really looking hard at seeing how they might be the most organized source?

TOMSETH: Well, there were some people who certainly were concerned about this. I think this is one of those instances where Henry Kissinger was right, in a wa(end of tape)

The role or the influence of the Communist Party in Iran, this is one of these instances where Kissinger had a point with Global Outlook Policy, that being an area expert or a narrow specialist can often result in a degree of myopia that actually prevents you from seeing things contemporary in their full perspective. Those who tended to be most concerned about the Tudeh (meaning "People"), the CommunisParty, were people who had experience from Iran in the 1950s and 1960s when the Tudeh actually meant something. But in the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the one thing that SAVAK did fairly effectively was to break the Tudeh. They rounded up and in one way or another dealt with the leadership of the party fairly effectively. Coupled with that was the policy of the Soviet Union, which in that same period was basically to develop as good a relationship with the regime as possible. In effect, they sold out the domestic communist party in Iran for the sake of tank sales and things like that. For people like myself who didn't have this background, being sort of new and naive, it wasn't very difficult to see that what we really needed to be worried about was not the Tudeh but newer radical forces, whether they were the so called Islamic Marxists, as the Shah called them, the Mojadin A Halq, and the Fedehin A Halq, or these more traditionally based but nonetheless revolutionary Islamic forces that had sort of emerged in the course of the revolution. I think that certainly personally and for my colleagues in the Political Section, who included Mike Metrinko and John Lemer, both of whom had been Peace Corps volunteers in Iran, we were much more focused on these contemporary political forces rather than the Tudeh, which to us seemed a phenomenon of the past. But establishing contact with these people was not easy.

Q: We closed down our consulates and it sounds like a bunch of political lords with these revolutionary committees, it sounds like we were fairly well limited to Teheran, weren't we?

TOMSETH: To a degree, although we tried to get people out. One of things we used was the pretext of checking on our properties in Shiraz, Tabriz, and Isfahan. We didn't own these things, but we had kept the leases. The hope was that eventually it would be possible to reopen these posts. So, we would send people out from time to time to check on them. But one of the great concerns in the spring and early summer of 1979 (You mentioned warlords.) was the phenomenon of the fissiparous tendencies in Iran. This is a country that had often sort of flown apart. You had nascent movements in the Kurdish area of Iran and, to a lesser degree, in some of the Turkish speaking areas of Iran, that looked like they might be going that direction in the early months of 1979. Again, we tried to get some handle on that phenomena as well in the political reporting that we were doing.

Q: What about the Kurds? The Kurds are always, along with the Palestinians, the problem in the Middle East. Were we able to make any contact or get any feel about the Kurds?

TOMSETH: Yes, actually, Mike Metrinko, who, as I said, had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran and had from those times some fairly good Kurdish contacts, was a very useful asset in trying to get some feel for what was going on. Ultimately, what happened in Kurdistan was basically the long, sorry history of the Kurds, their inability to cooperate with one another. In the end, they defeated themselves through internal factionalism. Even though the regime in those early months was hardly in a position to do much about a separatist movement in the Kurdish areas, what happened in Iranian Kurdistan in those months was that the whole thing imploded because of internal factionalism among clan leaders.

Q: You mentioned this problem with Christopher and, I take it, probably Brzezinski was probably in there stirring things up, too. Did we know what we were doing? We always want good relations with a country. Here it is, yet you have the Shah floating around. Do you think we were making any sense to anybody who was trying to deal with us?

TOMSETH: Incoherence was a constant background noise. For those of us in the mission, the marching orders were really not too complex and comprehensible. Whether or not it was a mission impossible is another matter. I can talk a little bit about something that happened in May and June of 1979 just before Bruce Laingen arrived on the scene that illustrated the situation that we were dealing with.

Basically, what we were told to do (and it made sense) was to try and sort out all of these things that had been left behind in thhasty drawdown. Part of that process was to convince the new powers that be in Iran that our intentions really were honorable, that we really did accept what had happened in Iran, and that we wanted a positive relationship with that new Iran. That is not difficult to grasp. It leads to certain logical steps in terms of embassy operations. Those included sorting out all of the military contracts that the previous regime left behind. The provisional government, one of the things that it quickly realized was, even though they might think that the Shah was wasting the national patrimony to a very large extent, buying all these weapons systems, that even a revolutionary Iran wanted a capable, professional military establishment. That meant going through these and figuring out what you wanted to keep, what you might want to scale back, and what you wanted to do away with. They needed our help to do that. We had the expertise. Over the course of the spring and summer, we actually developed not always a very happy, but a fairly well functioning interaction with the Iranian side in a process to go through these contracts.

Another thing that we knew we had to do and was very much wanted on the Iranian side was to get a consular operation operating again. We weren't going back to that, from a security point of view, indefensible building that we had rented for the consular operation. That meant we had to build a new facility on the compound. In the spring and summer, that was done. By August, we had a new facility. We had gotten consular officers into place and we opened up for visa business to Hozanahs and large crowds, including a lot of the new revolutionary establishment that were just as anxious as they had ever been to be able to get their children and themselves visas so that they could travel to the United States. Those sorts of things were... It was fairly obvious what we had to do. Over the spring and summer, we did it. Washington for its part recruited new people to begin filling up those positions that had been vacated in February. We were using a small crew of holdovers and TDY personnel to man during the course of the summer.

Is this a good point to talk about May?

Q: Why don't we talk about May and then we'll stop at this point?

TOMSETH: Okay. One of the things that we, the U.S. government, did to demonstrate our desire to work with the new regime and at the same time to have some continuity in the relationship was, as Bill Sullivan left, a new person was appointed to succeed him. That was Walter Cutler. We sought agrement and got it from the provisional government. He had a confirmation hearing in late April or early May. In May, he was just about to come out to Teheran to take up his duties. During this same period in Iran itself, they had revolutionary courts all over the country dispensing Judge Roy Bean justice. In late April, a prominent Iranian businessman was executed after being tried by one of these revolutionary courts. That led the U.S. Senate to adopt a Sense of the Senate Resolution, sponsored by Jacob Javits of New York.

Q: I think that businessman was Jewish.

TOMSETH: He was. This resolution was condemnatory of the activities of the revolutionary courts. That prompted demonstrations outside the embassy. We had, once again, huge crowds and Marines on full alert, and a skeleton crew manning the barricades. Charlie Naas by this time was charge d'affaires. When that happened, the government called him in and he and I went to see Amir Antazam, the deputy prime minister. Antazam said, "In this atmosphere, we think you should have Ambassador Cutler wait a little bit before he comes out to post." So, we sent back a cable to Washington conveying that message and Washington said, "Okay, he will wait a little bit." Then a week or so later, Antazam called Charlie in again and we went off to see him. Antazam said, "Well, we've actually been looking once again at Walter Cutler's curriculum vitae and we have come to the conclusion that he is not really the best man to have here in Iran. He has served in Vietnam."

Q: At a very low level, as an ambassador's aide, I think.

TOMSETH: "And he was your ambassador in Zaire. We just really don't think it would be best to have somebody who has been in these U.S. puppet countries come to Iran." Charlie told him, "That is not a message that is going to go down very well in Washington, but if that is the message you want us to send, we will do it." We did.

But in the midst of that, we had these demonstrations around the embassy. Real questions about the viability of this approach that we had been trying to pursue since February... Charlie convened a couple of sessions of people who had been thermyself, Phil Ghast, who was the head of the MAAG (Military Advisory Group) mission, Mike Metrinko, and a few others who had been around for a little whilto talk about our posture. Even with these TDY people, we had at any given moment 50 60 Americans in the embassy. This whole incident with the sense of the Senate resolution and the second thoughts about Cutler coming to Iran raised serious questions about the viability of our approach. I remember at one point in one of those meetings, I suggested that maybe what we ought to do is cut back to six people with a dog and we make the dog chargï¿½ and just sort of hunker down and see how things go for a few months. But in the end, the consensus that came out of those meetings (and I must say, I adhered to that consensus) was that Iran was just too important a country to take that approach. While we all knew that there were risks, we could not control many of the things that affected the situation in Iran (for example, the U.S. Senate or the revolutionary courts), that the stake that the United States had in Iran was so great that we had to give it our best effort. That consensus very largely shaped the approach that we continued to take from June of 1979 up to November, when the second attack on the embassy occurred.

Q: I think this is a good place to stop. We will pick this up the next time. You talked about having the meeting to decide whether we should really draw down or try to keep going. What was the argument for not... It's an important place, but did you feel you could do anything by having a full scale or moderately scaled embassy?

TOMSETH: These days, after the experience of the late 20 years, I think we have learned some things. I often think that the human race is pretty slow when it comes to learning experiences, but in the last two decades, I think we have learned some things. These days, I think there is a much greater willingness to think in terms of cutting staff way back or even closing down operationas, for example, in Khartoum, where a decision was made a while back that we would, in effect, remove the staff from the embassy in Khartoum, keep a few people in Nairobi, and maybe have visitors fly in from time to time. The situation on the ground in Sudan itself was such that we simply could not have a viable full time operation in Khartoum.

In 1979, the Foreign Service didn't have the body of experience that it does in 1999. I think, as a consequence, there was much less willingness to challenge conventional thinking. That might be the case today. I know that certainly applied in my own case. While I could make a joke about drawing down and be half way serious about it, it was not possible for me to entertain the idea that you were going to have an embassy operation in a country like Iran that really had been a linchpin of U.S. Middle East policy for such a long time, that wasn't a full blown embassy.

Q: We'll pick this up the next time. The decision has been made to maintain the embassy. We're in May of 1979.

TOMSETH: By early June. It was just after that that Bruce Laingen then came out. He was caught on home leave and asked if he would be willing to come out to Teheran for a couple of weeks while they tried to figure out what to do about the Cutler situation.

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Q: Today is July 1, 1999. I'll let you pick it up.

TOMSETH: We had left off in May of 1979 at a point when the Senate had passed a Sense of the Senate Resolution critical of the revolutionary courts operating in Iran, which in turn prompted the provisional government in Teheran to ask first that we delay the arrival of Walter Cutler, who had been named as our new ambassador to Teheran and had just been confirmed by the Senate, and then shortly thereafter to request that we not send him at all and rather put forward another candidate.

That in turn led the State Department to ask Bruce Laingen, who had just finished his tour as ambassador to Malta and was on home leave in Minnesota, if he would come out to Teheran for a couple of weeks or so while Washington tried to figure out what to do about the issue of Cutler and the Iranian request that we not send him after all.

Q: What was our reading on the Cutler thing? Was this Cutler or was this just wanting to make a point?

TOMSETH: I think what happened was that when the Javits Resolution prompted them to ask us to delay his arrival, some people went back and looked at his career assignments up to that point and saw in those assignments things that caused them to wonder if they went ahead with this, if they wouldn't be vulnerable to accusation of accepting someone or some group Iran would object to.

Q: He had been in Vietnam in the late 1960s.

TOMSETH: And he had just been ambassador in Zaire. I think what some people in the government became worried about was that they would be vulnerable to criticism from political rivals within Iran that they had accepted somebody who had served in these countries which at the time were viewed by some, probably many, Iranians as essentially American stooges.

Q: Something we did not cover was the series of trials and somexecutions that were going on. I think the thing that really spurred the Javits Amendment was that some fairly well known Jews were killed.

TOMSETH: One in particular.

Q: During this period, up to May or so, how did we see the Iranian justice system?

TOMSETH: The justice system was operating like virtually all other parts of the system. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the last government that the Shah had appointed in February, all sorts of groups seized bits of power that were lying around. That certainly included the judiciary. There was this general notion that Iran should be an Islamic republic. That gave the clergy a step up on potential rivals for claim to the judiciary system. Their argument was that in an Islamic state, Islamic clergy as the foremost interpreters of Islamic law, should constitute the legal system. So, a number of them set themselves up as judges and operated courts that were very much independent of one another and independent of anyone else, for that matter. People were being brought before these courts in substantial numbers and given a very quick summary trial with, by our notions, no due process whatsoever. Frequently, they were condemned to death and taken up on the roof of the building and shot forthwith. In terms of minority communities in Iran who were subject to this kind of "West of the Pacos" justice, there were several Christian denominationArmenian, Assyriat, and Zoroastrian Christians. There is a small community of Zoroastrian Christians still in Iran. And there was a Jewish community, which in 1978 1979 probably numbered somewhere between 60 70,000 people in Iran. They were by and large left alone. The real targets of these revolutionary committees and courts were people who had been closely associated with the previous regime. If they happened to be a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian, that wasn't going to save them from this Islamic justice. But as near as we could discern, there was no attempt on the part of the courts or the committees to go after a religious minority per swith one exception, and that was the Bahais, who by the likes of the Muslim majority, were not a religious minority, but rather apostates. The Bahais suffered very severely at the hands of these courts. But in this one case, there was a very prominent Jewish businessman who was hauled before one of the courts and accused of spying for Israel and promptly executed. That led to this Sense of the Senate Resolution sponsored by Javits that was passed in early May of 1979.

Q: Did you find yourself under any pressure from those who were unhappy about what was happening in Iran in the United States to turn this into "These Muslim fanatics are going after the Jews?" This always arouses a significant political force, if you can show this. Did you have to be careful not to overdownplay or you would be in political trouble back in Washington?

TOMSETH: It was a very difficult political problem. These were not insignificant numbers of people who were being brought before these courts. Many of them were executed in circumstances where by no reasonable argument based upon internationally accepted standards of justice were they getting justice. Nobody was inclined to sweep that under the carpet. There was certainly pressure from the United States from all sorts of groups to try to do something about this. The reality was, we had virtually no influence to do anything about that. The government itself had no control over these courts. But in the case of this one Jewish businessman, that prompted a particular kind of pressure that in some respects, I suppose, was more urgent than coming from any number of other groups, constituencies, in the United States, whether they were human rights based or religious based or what have you, to try and do something about the situation. What we found we could dabout the only thing we could dwas to try to have as extensive contacts among these various communities as possible and stay in regular touch with them to hear from them how they felt the situation was in terms of potential jeopardy at the hands of these courts.

In the case of the Christian denominations and Zoroastrians, at that time, in the spring and summer of 1979, most people seemeinclined to make their peace with the new regime, to try to ride it out. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, too, although, I think, in other Muslim countries they would not be regarded as people of the book, in Iran, they would, and while they might be second class citizens in this new Islamic republic, there was the intention of the political leadership and the religious leadership, too, I think, to recognize them as a constituent component of the Iranian body politic and to accord them certain rights within that political system.

The Jewish community was a little different. There had already been a pattern of emigration to Israel or, to a lesser extent, to the United States, and to Europe. I think a number of people in the Jewish community were not terribly confident about the future and saw, to put it crassly, an opportunity in these circumstances to generate sympathy, support, and a willingness on the part of members of the international community to facilitate the emigration of Iranian Jews who wanted to go to Israel, the United States, or wherever. In effect, that is what happened. I can't tell you what the size of the Jewish community in Iran is today, but even during the course of the spring and the summer of 1979, our best guestimate was that that population fell from somewhere between 50 60,000 to perhaps half or even less of that number.

Q: Prior to the overthrow of the Shah, how close were Israeli Iranian ties? Was it an immediate, abrupt cutting off? How did this work?

TOMSETH: Starting with the second half first, yes, the break was immediate in February of 1979 when this new regime came to power. There was a competition for power and the provisional government was only one of the competitors. But with the fall of the last of the Shah's governments and the emergence of this new constellation of forces, the break in relations with Israel was immediate and complete. The building that the Israelis had used to house their embassy was given to the Palestinian Liberation Organization. They immediately set up shop in place of the Israelis.

Under the Shah, the principle of the Iranian government's foreign policy was what is in the interests of Iran. It wasn't religious based at all. There was a certain sensitivity to their relationship with Israel. Israel did not have an ambassador in Iran. But they had a functioning embassy and an aid program. They provided various kinds of expertise to the regime in support of its development program and in support of its national security program, most principally to SAVAK, the intelligence and security organization that under the Shah achieved a great deal of notoriety in terms of its suppression of political dissidents.

Q: We're still talking about around May. Were all of you thumbing through your "Carlyle's French Revolution" or something? Were you looking at this and figuring out where this one went? It seems almost like a classic revolution.

TOMSETH: It was. I think there was considerable apprehension among stafor at least the staff that was going to be therbecause at that point in May, we had a relatively small number of people who had stayed on after the February attack and an even smaller number who were going to stay long term. These were supplemented with people who came in on temporary duty assignments of anywhere from a week to six weeks. But there was a corps of people who habeen around for a while and a few of us who were planning on staying long term. Among that group, there was certainly a great deal of apprehension that the revolution even at that stage had begun to eat its children.

In the aftermath of the Javits Resolution and Cutler imbroglio, Charlie Naas, who was charge d'affaires at the time, convened a couple of meetings for people to sit around and talk about the situation and try to come up with some ideas about what could we do, what should we do. I recall in one of those meetings that I suggested that it might not be possible to operate a full blown embassy, to reopen the Consular Section as was planned, and that instead, we perhaps ought to think about reducing the number of people that we had to a very small number and just sort of hunker down and try to ride out this revolutionary storm that obviously had nothe process had nocompleted itself. I think I suggested that we cut back to maybe six people and a dog and we make the dog the charge. That was obviously facetious to a degree, but only to a degree. But in the end, the consensus that emerged from those meetingand a consensus that I certainly willingly acceded twas that what was at stake in Iran was too important to not at least try to make something of the situation, to try to develop this new kind of relationship with the post Shah Iranian powers that be. That was the course that we pursued during the summer and fall of 1979.

Q: What about how we proceeded? One doesn't overdue these past revolutions, but the French Revolution and to some extent the Russian Revolution, you see that when a group finally does consolidate its power, it starts moving out. Did we see Iran going off into Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iraq? Was that coming down the pike?

TOMSETH: There was a certain amount of rhetoric from the very beginning about taking the message of the Iranian Revolution international. But the reality on the ground in the spring, summer, and into the fall of 1979 was that the domestic situation was so chaotic and that the need for consolidation and indeed the struggle for some share of power in the process of consolidation was so all consuming that one didn't really need to be terribly concerned about the rhetoric about spreading the Iranian revolutionary message internationally.

Q: With the Javits Amendment, much has been made of our acceptance of the Shah and what that would do. Did our embassy have any input before the Javits Amendment came out? It would strike me that this would be seen by those on the ground as being provocative and it might screw things up for the rest of the Jewish community.

TOMSETH: Up to May, to the best of my knowledge, the embassy as an institution was not explicitly asked by Washington for its views on admitting the Shah to the United States. I know that Bill Sullivan certainly had discussions while he was still in Teheran with Washington about the Shah. This was after the Shah's departure in January and before Sullivan's departure in early April. At the time the Shah lef(end of tape)

There was a general agreement among all of the players on the U.S. government side that when the Shah left Iran in January of 1979, he would go to the United States, that that was not an issue that at that time was contentious. But the Shah himself chose not to. He went initially to Morocco and then to Egypt for a while. By March or thereabouts, I know that Bill Sullivan felt that for the Shah then to go to the United States would be potentially very harmful to the policy that Washington had decreed, which was to try to make a go of it with the new regime in Iran. But again, I don't think that was ever put on a piece of paper. These were telephone conversations that Sullivan had with the State Department. But that view was shared in Washington. I k now that Henry Precht, who was the country director for Iran at that time, certainly felt that having missed this window of opportunity when he left Iran initially, that for the Shah to come to the United States before this revolutionary process in Iran had really run its course and there had been a consolidation of authority in Iran would certainly jeopardize what we were trying to do. But it was only after the Javits Resolution that the embassy's formal views were solicited on that score. This was probably in early July. When that was done, Bruce Laingen had arrived. It was in the form of a cable that was sent to Bruce for him alone. Bruce, to his everlasting credit, said to himself, "I have just arrived here. I am not going to answer this question without consulting with some people in the embassy who have been around longer than I." He did that. He did talk to several people. Phil Ghast was one of them. I was one of them. There were probably a couple of others. On the basis of those discussions, he formulated a response, which was that, yes, at some point, the United States should be prepared to accept the Shah in the United States, but that should not come before the situation in Iran had been clarified, and that a government that really was in charge was in place. That was certainly not the case with the provisional government. At that particular juncture, I do not think that it was yet generally known that the Shah had cancer. That came to light, at least publicly, only subsequent to that message to Bruce in the summer of 1979. He was, however, asked again, I think in September, and the answer was essentially the same, that if the Shah were to be allowed to come to the United States prior to a sorting out of the situation in Iran, it could be very dangerous to the policy that we were trying to pursue, a policy that was decreed essentially by Washington of trying to build some kind of a new relationship with the new Iran.

Q: Did the reaction to the Javits Amendment sensitize the embassy, you all, to the fact that the Iranians, those that were struggling for power, were looking at how we were reacting and using this to inflame things? What we were doing in the United States had its effect on Iran?

TOMSETH: I don't think that came as any great surprise because of the reaction to the Javits Resolution. There had been any number of other indications prior to that that people did pay attention to what was going on in the United States in terms of the view of what was happening in Iran and that one faction or another would always be ready to try to use that for their own domestic political advantage. Just as some of these things, I think the Javits Resolution had far more to do with politics in the United States than it did with the situation in Iran. I find it impossible to believe that a very large majority of the Senate really believed that this resolution was going to make any difference at all in terms of the treatment of the Jewish community in Iran, but it was very important in terms of the Jewish constituency in the United States.

Q: But you all had no particular input before this happened?

TOMSETH: No.

Q: We keep coming to this from time to time, but let's talk about our perception at this point. The Soviet threat to Iran... later on, newspapers were having big red arrows going through Iran down to Khorramshahr and all that. What was the feeling about what was happening in Iran and what the Soviets might do about it?

TOMSETH: I think you have to back up a little bit and look at the relationship between Iran and the Soviet Union in the latter years of the Shah's regime. That had becomnot that Iran ever trusted the Sovietbut the Shah had decided that he wanted to have some kind of a relationship with Moscow. That included in the security area as well. He did not want to be totally dependent upon the United States as a source of arms. He had very purposefully gone to the Soviets for some Iranian weapons procurement, particularly armor and artillery. So you had that as a background when the revolution occurred. Again, examining the rhetoric of the revolution, I think those of us in Iran felt that while there was a particular focus on the United States because of the special relationship that we had enjoyed with the Shah and his government, that there was no propensity on the part of these new forces to get in bed with the Soviets. One of the standard slogans that was shouted in all these demonstrations that were constantly going on in the streets or Teheran was "Nashark Nakharb (Neither East nor West)." It's a slogan, but it is indicative of a mindset. I don't think that there was any real sentiment in Iran, particularly among the Islamic forces, for having a closer relationship with the Soviet Union than the Shah had, and maybe not as close as he had. What the Soviets were thinking in terms of possible advantage in Iran as a consequence of this is probably more complex. I don't doubt that they saw an opportunity to get a greater degree of balance in terms of Iranian foreign policy than had existed for decades, at least in terms of how Iran related to the Soviet Union on the one hand and the West on the other. But I'm not sure that they had any great schemes for pushing those arrows through Iranian territory to the Persian Gulf.

Q: How was the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan playing during this period? Was this just not of particular interest?

TOMSETH: Well, the Soviets weren't overtly involved in Afghanistan yet.

Q: We're talking about 197 .

TOMSETH: This was 1979. The coup that overthrew Daud was in April of 1978. The Communist Party, it was generally assumed that the Soviets had a lot of influence with the Communist Party. But the Soviets weren't physically involved in Iran yet. That didn't happen until December of 1979.

Q: As the situation was evolving, how much of an albatross was our whole military procurement program? This was a lot of money, a lot of commitment on both sides, and all that. Was it a writeoff? We're we going to let things just rust and go on? We must have been pressured by Bell Helicopter and other people to do something to straighten this out. How much was this an issue?

TOMSETH: In the embassy, I don't think we saw it so much as an albatross as an opportunity. Fairly quickly, the provisional revolutionary government realized that some of what the Shah had been doing, they would want to continue in pursuit of what they themselves regarded as legitimate national security requirements. But the dilemma for them was, did they need all of the stuff that the Shah had signed up for? Their general view was, probably not. That thought process presented an opportunity for us, the embassy, to work with the provisional revolutionary government in trying to sort out all of these issues: what do you want to keep; what do you want to continue; what do you want to cancel? For that reason, we kept on in Teheran a small military presence outside the Defense attache's office, a sort of residual MAAG, which was a key component of our team in negotiating with the Iranian government what to do about these various weapons systems procurement contracts and all of the ancillary support that went with them. Throughout the spring and summer, we saw these negotiations, as difficult and as frustrating as they often were, as a way of moving the peanut forward in terms of building this new kind of relationship with Iran.

If I may jump ahead a little bit, one of the ironies of the seizure of the embassy on November 4, 1979 was that that morning, there was a meeting scheduled with the Legal Affairs people in the foreign ministry to talk about the status of this residual military assistance group that we had operating in the embassy. One of the first things the new government had done after February of 1979 was to void the military assistance agreement that we had with Iran that had existed since the 1950s. That agreement had provided the status for the MAAG. So, we had asked the Department for information on other situations where we didn't have a bilateral military agreement, but where we did have a military assistance program, for use with the Iranians on how they might, in effect, give these people some kind of status within the diplomatic mission without having a bilateral mutual security arrangement. Ann Swift was supposed to go with Bruce to that meeting, but she had been out of town over the weekend with some friends from the New Zealand embassy and had car trouble and they were late getting back. So, I wound up going with Bruce to that meeting on the morning of November fourth. It was while we were in that meeting that the attack on the embassy began.

The meeting itself actually was quite positive. It was a very productive meeting. We came out of it thinking that we had made some real progress towards an arrangement that would give these nine, 10, or 12, however many there were, military people that were housed in the embassy some legal status within the overall U.S. diplomatic mission. We came out of that meeting only to find out from Mike Howland, the security officer who had remained with the car, that there was an attack underway at the embassy.

Q: Going back to this period, Bruce Laingen arrived... When he arrived, was there a feeling of, okay, maybe this is a new start, or things are cranking up? What was the spirit of the period?

TOMSETH: Bruce had come on the understanding that he would be there only a short time. That was our understanding as well. But his arrival was very much welcomed. Charlie Naas was certainly liked and respected by people in the embassy, but he himself felt that he needed to get out of there, that he had been through all of this trauma over the previous year and a half or so. So, Bruce arrived as a fresh person. He is also a very good person. He had some Iranian background. He had served in Iran in the 1950s. So, he was a kind of breath of fresh air in terms of staff morale and leadership. He was somebody that people immediately had the greatest respect for. So, even though we didn't think he was going to be there very long, his arrival actually was a very positive boost for the embassy staff, those of us who were more or less permanent and TDYers alike.

Q: Can you recreate the briefing when he got there? What were you telling him?

TOMSETH: I am sure we must have had some kind of initial formal brief and that we had for him a briefing book, but I think probably more important than that were the series of meetings that Bruce had [in Washington and Teheran].

Q: What was the feeling?

TOMSETH: Perhaps, at least by my lights, the most important aspect of his initiation, if you will, to the Iran that he had arrived in was something that had been developing over the previous several months in terms of the way most of the people in the embassy looked at the situation in Iran and the way the desk looked at the situation in Iran.

The previous year, Henry Precht, who was the country director, had been right virtually before anyone else in the State Department in terms of where things were headed in Iran. He before anyone else in Washington came to the conclusion that the jig was up for the Shah, if you will, and that we, the U.S. government, really needed to focus our attention and our energies on not trying to figure out ways to keep him in power, but how we were going to deal with everything that was going to follow.

Having been right in 1978, I think Henry was wrong in 1979 in that he tended to focus on the good news in 1979 rather than the bad news. It was kind of like these "Is the glass half full or half empty" discussions I had had a couple of years earlier with our DCM, Jack Miklos. When Bruce came out, he had been briefed by the desk, so he had that view. I think that in the discussion that he had with people in the embassy when he arrived, we tended to try to focus him on, yes, there are some positive things. We won't deny that. Indeed, these negotiations on the military contracts in a way were one of the positive things. But there are a lot of things that are very troublesome about the situation: the revolutionary courts, the dissidents in Kurdistan, the fact that power was so badly fragmented throughout Iran and that we had that right on our own embassy compound in terms of the security force that had been left there after the first attack on the embassy in February in which we desperately wanted to get off of the compound, but we couldn't find anybody on the Iranian side with the authority to tell them to get off.

Q: What was the core of the permanent staff that was going to stay on?

TOMSETH: By the time Bruce got there in late June, the holdovers that we knew were going to be there longer term were myself; Mike Metrinko, who had been our consul in Tabriz and had come down tjoin me in the Political Section; the Army attache, Leland Holland; the Defense attache, who was also the Air Force attache, Tom Schaffer; and Barry Rosen, who was the Press attache and also, like Mike Metrinko, a former Peace Corps volunteer in Iran and a good Farsi speaker. Additionally, some of the people who were going to be there permanently, new people, had begun to arrive. I think John Lambert had gotten there by the time that Bruce arrived. Mike Howland, who was one of the security officers, had arrived. He was going to be there long term. Certainly within a few weeks of Bruce's arrival, quite a few more of those who were going to stay on longer term began arriving as well, some of the people who had been in language or other kinds of training prior to coming out. So, even before he got there, but certainly in the initial weeks of his time there, we began to develop a core staff who were going to be around. In the Political Section, that included myself, Mike Metrinko, John Lambert, and Ann Swift, who got there more or less the same time that Bruce did. So, we were fully staffed in the Political Section by the summer of 1979.

Q: Were there any decisions made on consular affairs?

TOMSETH: Well, the most important decision early on, back in February, was that we would reopen a full service Consular Section. We made a commitment to do that. The Consular Section had been in commercially rented space in a building off the compound. In light of the security situation, it was deemed that that was not tenable, that the new consular operation had to be on the compound. So, in the spring and most of the summer of 1979, there was a major construction project to renovate the building that had been used as the Recreation Association kind of all purpose building on one corner of the compound into a physically secure Consular Section. That opened up the last week of August or the first week of September. By that time, we had pretty much a full consular staff, although there were a few temporary duty people still there in November when the attack occurred.

Q: Were the Iranian students in the United States, both going there and in the United States, at all a force during this period?

TOMSETH: Well, there was a huge Iranian population. I think after the attack, one of the things Carter did was direct the INS to do a census. The INS came up with 50,000+ Iranian students at that point. Prior to that, some of these students had come back to participate in the revolution or after the fall of the Shah to sort of get on the revolutionary bandwagon.

Q: Well, many of them had been demonstrating yearly against the Shah in the United States.

TOMSETH: I can't give you any hard numbers on this. The number that chronically demonstrated against the Shah while they were students in the United States far exceeded the number that came back to Iran. But there were some that came back, no question about it. We encountered some of those people right away. In the foreign ministry, for example, the current foreign minister was one of those people who had gone to the United States as a student. He was a medical student. He had come back and was made a senior foreign ministry official.

Q: Was this at all a tool...

TOMSETH: In Teheran, we were sort of aware that some Iranian students were making a nuisance of themselves in the United States, but when had they not made a nuisance of themselves? From our perspective, they weren't a very significant factor in terms of the situation on the ground in Iran. If you were going to be a player in that situation, you had to be there. You couldn't influence it from the campus at Berkeley or Ann Arbor.

Q: How were we seeing the situation? We're talking about Bruce arriving, the summer has come, is the glass half empty or half full... Were things beginning to coalesce or was it still chaotic? How did you see developments?

TOMSETH: More chaos than coalescence. There were some things that were happening that suggested the possibility that this process could lead to the creation of a government that would actually be in charge. One of the more important dimensions in that situation was, there was a constituent assembly that was appointed and was meeting to draft a constitution. The progress was painfully slow, but they were meeting and they were making some progress. So when, for example, in September, when Bruce was asked again about the possibility of admission of the Shah to the United States (and by this time, his cancer was certainly public knowledge), Bruce responded that if that were to occur before there was a government clearly in charge, he wasn't just blowing smoke, that there was some expectation that this process could lead to that kind of outcome. We didn't expect that to happen terribly quickly, but there were developments that were leading in that direction. Certainly, on these negotiations on military contracts, they were often very painful, very frustrating. You would think that you got something sorted out and go to the next meeting thinking you were going to move on to something else only to discover that what you thought had been decided was on the table for negotiation yet again. But if you looked at the course of what had been happening over the previous several months, it was pretty clear that we were making some progress on that front. So, the news wasn't altogether negative by any stretch of the imagination. But the pervasive reality in a political sense, even in the fall, was this tremendous factionalization of political power. I used to like to say that no one was in charge and everyone was in charge. You had in Teheran, for example, in virtually every government ministry and office a revolutionary committee, self appointed, that existed to second guess the decisions of whatever the institution's leadership said. So, if the foreign minister made a decision about something, he could not be sure at all that he wouldn't be second guessed by the foreign ministry revolutionary committee.

Q: During this period, were we seeing a possible leadership? We're talking about some names or groups that we felt were beginning to move and might eventually form a real government with whom we could deal?

TOMSETH: Well, there were people that we were dealing with in the provisional government. I suppose in our heart of hearts, we hoped that some, if not all, of those people would emerge in prominent positions in a permanent government. Those people included people like Mehdi Bazargan, the prime minister; Ibrahim Yazdi, the foreign minister; Amir Antazam, one of the deputy prime ministers. But we knew very well that these people were by no stretch of the imagination on the commanding heights of the political process in Iran, that there were others in the religious leadership who were far more powerful, but it was very difficult to have much contact with those people. They tended to not want to deal with us at all. One exception to that was a guy named Ayatollah Beheshdi. He was much more educated than the typical Iranian clergyman, or at least more broadly educated. He had not only a religious education, but a secular one as well. For a number of years... There is a large Iranian mosque in Hamburg, I think, in Germany. He had been in charge of that mosque for five or six years. So, he had lived in the West and he spoke German. As I recall, he even spoke some English, although I don't think his English was nearly as good as his German. He was prepared to receive people from the embassy. Bruce called on him several times. Another one was Ayatollah Montazeri, who at one time looked like he was going to be Khomeini's successor, but sort of fell out with the more conservative religious leadership. He is still alive. He lives in Iran, but has not been a political factor for nearly 20 years now.

But aside from these two or three people, most of the religious leadership really didn't want to have anything to do with us. Try as we might, it was very difficult to establish any contacts among them.

Q: Were you getting any either arranged or gratuitous visits from dignitary personalities in the United State to come and try to put things right? I'm thinking of Jesse Jackson and that ilk.

TOMSETH: No, not really. A lot of them came out of the woodwork after November fourth, but in the spring and summer of 1979, there weren't too many volunteers to come out to Iran and put things right.

Q: What about the French, German, British, and Canadian embassies? How were they seeing things? What were they doing? Were they in a different category than the Americans, we being the "Great Satan?"

TOMSETH: There were a number of countries that had very important economic stakes in Iran. The ones you named were certainly among them. Japan was another one. Those embassies tended to focus on how do we protect our economic interests in Iran? With the exception of the British, they tended not to have a whole lot of political baggage. In the case of the Germans, it was one of these accidents of history, I guess, that they actually were in fairly good odor. A number of Iranian dissidents, including religious Iranians, had found a sanctuary in Germany during periods of the Shah's rule when it was not comfortable to be in Iran. To a degree, that was also true of France.

Q: The Ayatollah Khomeini lived in France.

TOMSETH: Only for a very short time. He had spent most of his exile in Iraq. It was only in the summer of 1978 that the Iraqis kicked him out under pressure from the Iranian government. At that point, he went to Paris.

Q: So, the other embassies were keeping their heads down and taking care of their commercial interests.

TOMSETH: For the most part. The British were a little different in a couple of respects. One is, next to the United States, they were probably considered by more Iranians as at least a lesser Satan

Q: They had the big oil interests in Mossadegh and all that, a lot of baggage there.

TOMSETH: Right. But a lot of their influence had really waned over the intervening three decades from the time of Mossadegh's fall and the fall of the Shah. But the British, too, unlike most of the European embassies, had a cadre of Persian specialists, people who spoke the language and really knew the country well.

Q: Were you sitting down and jointly reading tea leaves with the Brits, for example?

TOMSETH: Certainly with our colleagues in the British embassy Political Section, we did. We found them among all of our diplomatic colleagues the most well informed about what was going on. You could meet with them and they would have things to tell you. When we met with the others, it was sort of a one way street. We were the ones that were providing information and not getting very much in return.

Q: Was the Political Section getting out into the streets, into the souk and other places?

TOMSETH: Actually, we were. By July, we had our Political Section in place. That included all four of us who were Persian speakers. Certainly Mike Metrinko and John Lambert were virtually bilingual. At the risk of immodesty, mine was not bad. I had been there over three years and I am a fairly good language student, so I spoke fairly good Persian. Ann Swift was newly arrived and hers was not as good. But she is a good language student, too, and she was out and about and meeting a lot of people.

Q: Did this pay off at all?

TOMSETH: Well, no, in the sense that all of the contacts that we had, including limited contacts among the religious leadership, didn't do us a damn bit of good coming November fourth! But certainly in terms of the ongoing political reporting that the embassy did, yes, a lot of that material fell into the hands of the students when they seized the embassy and was subsequently published. Rereading that record, I think the Political Section actually looks pretty good.

Q: What about these demonstrations? Were they going on all the time?

TOMSETH: Yes. Again, jumping ahead just a little bit to the morning of November fourth, that was an anniversary of an incident that took place at Teheran University that year before. There was going to be a demonstration at the university that day to commemorate the anniversary. One of the main streets leading to the university went right in front of the embassy. So, in the morning staff meeting, there were some who were in favor of closing the embassy down with just a skeleton staff on hand just in case some of these people marching by the embassy en route to Teheran University might get some ideas to do something. Prescient political analyst that I am, I argued that if you close down the embassy every time there is a demonstration in Teheran, you might as well close it down permanently because hardly a day goes by when there isn't a demonstration in some part of the city about something.

Q: In a way, one has had a surfeit of demonstrations so that they were almost meaningless, weren't they?

TOMSETH: Not meaningless, but we, again, at the time of the Javits Resolution, there were demonstrations that were focused specifically on the embassy. We did stand down the staff and had just a few people in the embassy and recalled the Marine guards to be on duty when that happened. But if it was a demonstration like that one at Teheran University, which was not particularly aimed at us, yes, you'd get kind of blase about these after a while. There were so many of theif you were going to worry about every one of them, you would spend all your time worrying about demonstrations.

Q: Having been bitten by the Javits Resolution, were we sending back stuff saying, "Fellows on the political side, cool it. We're here and we're vulnerable, so don't rattle the cage from the safety of Washington?" Was this part of our litany?

TOMSETH: I was probably more naive 20 years ago than I am now, but I wasn't that naive. No, we did not do that. We recognized that the Congress was going to do what it feels it needs to do for domestic political purposes and railing against the tide doesn't do a bit of good.

Q: Moving through the summer and up through the early fall, was anything happening that we haven't covered?

TOMSETH: A couple of things. I can give you examples, one good and one not so good. In August, we finally got rid of that security contingent. It took another paramilitary group to get them off the compound.

Q:you're talking about revolutionary Iranians who were sort of camping...

TOMSETH: Right. After the attack on the embassy in February, there were actually three groups that were assigned by the foreign ministry to protect us. For a time, they all had free range of this rather large compound. By the summer, that had dwindled down to a single group. The first one had got its hands caught in the cookie jar very early on at a time when the provisional revolutionary government still had some authority and they were removed within a couple of weeks or so. Then a little later on, the two remaining, one forced the other out. Being on the embassy compound was a cash cow for these. Neither group wanted to share with the other.

Q: How was it a cash cow?

TOMSETH: Well, we had a lot of things that we were disposing of, collecting household good of people who had left literally from the breakfast table, packing them up, getting rid of things, a lot of government property that had to be disposed of. Because these guys controlled who could get onto the compound, they could charge and did. So, if somebody wanted to come in and bid on vehicles we were auctioning off, they had to pay these guys off to even make a bid. There were a number of things like that. Even before we reopened the Consular Section, we were issuing a limited number of visas. These guys got into that. They became fixers beyond the perimeter in terms of how you might get your passport into the embassy. But in August, after a great deal of pleading and wheedling, the foreign ministry turned to another paramilitary group to put this group off of our compound, which they did.

Q: And they didn't replace that group with themselves?

TOMSETH: No. Iranian police were then assigned to patrol the outside the perimeter the way you would expect. This was very much in anticipation of the reopening of the Consular Section. In fact, I think that was probably the single most effective point of leverage we had with the foreign ministry. We said, "We're not going to reopen the Consular Section unless these guys are gone." A lot of people wanted that Consular Section reopened.

The thing that was not so good and sort of demonstrated our continuing vulnerability just a week or two before the Consular Section opened up in the evening somebody in a drive-by shooting put a rocket propelled grenade through the wall of the Consular Section. That brought home a couple of messages. One was that this sort of thing could happen at any moment. The other one was that even though this was supposed to be a hardened facility, that grenade went right through the wall.

Q: Prior to November fourth, had the Consular Section opened up full blast?

TOMSETH: To a very enthusiastic reception. Yes, it opened up the last week of August or the first week of September. There were literally thousands of people lined up every morning. Teheran prior to the revolution had been issuing over 100,000 non immigrant visas a year. The visa issuing operation had been almost shut down from February to when it reopened in the late summer. So, there was a great deal of pent up demand.

Q: I would have thought that there might have been counter crowds of screaming Bazaaris or what have you saying, "You're traitors. You're leaving the country. You're the elite. What are you doing going to America?"

TOMSETH: A lot of this was insurance policy. There were Bazaaris and mullahs. Everybody was out there. Nobody was exempt.

Q: Was there the feeling that this was an insurance for us, too? The fact that we're doing this would mean that we would be less likely to be shut down or have something happen because we're handing out these things?

TOMSETH: Well, it certainly crossed my mind and I think the minds of others that given the nature of Iranian society and the pervasive view that nothing endures and that the world basically is a pretty hostile place, that is why everyone needs an American visa, was a reason why a lot of people would not want to see relations with the United States broken entirely.

Q: Would this move us to November fourth?

TOMSETH: Yes, basically. Not much happened between the first of September and the lead-up to the embassy takeover. Yazdi, the foreign minister, went to New York and met with Secretary Vance there. My understanding is that Vance was prepared to tell Yazdi in that meeting that we would like to submit Bruce's name as a replacement for Walter Cutler, but the meeting proceeded in a way that it was not a terribly positive meeting. Vance for whatever reason chose not to do that, to make that proposal during that meeting. As a consequence, it never was done before the decision to admit the Shah in late February.

When that decision was made (This was about two weeks prior to the embassy takeover.), as did the Javits Resolution, it prompted a reaction in Iran that included demonstrations outside the embassy and a lot of criticism of the U.S. There was a great deal of concern in the embassy about where all this was going to lead. Right up to just a few days before the embassy takeover itself, the fourth was on a Sunday and on the preceding Friday, there was supposed to be the biggest demonstration up to that point at the embassy on that Friday. At the last moment, the religious hierarchy directed that the demonstrations should take place somewhere else at a square a couple of miles away from the embassy. Some people did show up, but extra police had been put on the guard around the embassy and nothing got out of hand. My interpretation of that was that we had probably gotten over the hill on this one. When the religious leadership itself seemed unprepared to risk an incident that might seriously disrupt the relationship. That is the way I read the decision to move it somewhere else. Then, I thought we had a pretty good chance of getting through this most recent crisis. What I certainly had not factored into that calculation and I don't think anyone else had was at the same time, Yazdi and the prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, had gone off to Algiers for the 20th anniversary celebration of the Algerian revolution. While they were there, they had a meeting with Zbigniew Brzezinski. That was a meeting that we in the embassy had encouraged as one of these things to indicate that we are, maybe slowly, making some progress in this endeavor to build a new relationship with Iran. I guess that meeting probably was on Thursday. The next day, on Friday, there was no Friday issue of the papers. That is the holiday. But on Saturday, there was a picture in all the papers of the prime minister shaking hands with Zbigniew Brzezinski. The next day, this student group carried out the assault on the embassy. I am convinced and have to be persuaded by some pretty powerful evidence to the contrary that the decision to admit the Shah to the United States is not what provoked that attack. It was a convenient excuse. But what really prompted this student group to move when it did was that photograph that appeared in the Saturday paper. This was a group that did not want to see our policy succeed. It did not want to see us be able to have a significant relationship with the new authorities in Iran. Their objective was to try and break that nexus. When they saw the prime minister shaking hands with Brzezinski, they saw that as evidence that, in fact, we were succeeding and that they needed to do something quickly to check that process.

Q: We're talking about a student group. One always thinks of our opposition student groups always coming out of a Marxist university. Even at our own universities, we have Marxists who are turning out these activists who are going out and doing things. I take it these students were a different breed of cat.

TOMSETH: Yes. Well, at that time, there were probably hundreds of student groups operating on campuses in Teheran and some of the provincial cities as well. Some of them were classical Marxists. Some were what the Shah used to call "Islamic Marxists," this group that is now based in Iraq, the Mojadin Al Halq, that sort. They claim to be religious, but a lot of their political doctrine certainly is Marxist inspired.

But this particular group of students were not. Their ideological basis was traditional Islam. If you looked at where most of those students came from, that was understandable enough. These were kids who were not for the most part in the top universities. They were not at Teheran University, but rather in a couple of the technical schools. They tended to come from very traditional provincial backgrounds rather than from Teheran, upper middle class backgrounds. So, their ideological compass really wasn't particularly surprising when you understood who they were.

Q: During this time, up to this time, what was the role of Ayatollah Khomeini from our reading?

TOMSETH: The consummate fence sitter, as he continued to be. This was one of the reasons why it took so long to resolve the hostage crisis. One of the keys to Khomeini's political success was that he succeeded in convincing all sorts of people that he was the indispensable person in terms of making a decision, but he would avoid making a decision for as long as possible. He recognized how fragmented the political situation in Iran was and that to make a decision in those circumstances almost inevitably meant you were going to alienate somebody. So, what he would do is wait as long as he calculated he could before making a pronouncement on one issue or another that people were looking to him for guidance. He often couched that in the most obtuse kind of rhetoric so it tended to be very difficult to figure out what he really meant. He always left himself a way out in that regard. That is the way he reacted to the admission of the Shah to the United States. He wasn't categorical... He was very critical of the United States, but he wasn't categorical in terms of what Iranians should do about it. Even when the embassy was seized, it took him 24 hours or so before he decided that this on balance was probably a good thing, not a bad thing. He didn't immediately come out and support it. Also, in that same context, on our side, one of the things that the Carter administration did was try to put together a small negotiating team that included Ramsey Clark. They were dispatched. They were all the way to Istanbul or Ankara before Khomeini finally let it be known that if they arrived in Teheran, that no one should deal with them. He didn't say they couldn't come, but if they did come, no one should negotiate with them.

Q: Were you getting a feel up to this time about the role of Brzezinski and the National Security Council being on a different course than the State Department or not?

TOMSETH: No, not at this point. There had been substantial differences between Brzezinski's view and at least his key staff people on how to deal with the Shah prior to his departure from Iran on the one hand and the State Department on the other. But with the seizure of the embassy, I didn't get any sense that there was any significant internal difference on how to approach the issue. In fact, my impression is that Carter, being Carter, he himself decided fairly early on that he was going to put the highest priority on some kind of a negotiated resolution for the sake of the hostages themselves. That is a policy decision that I certainly cannot oppose, but I recognize that it wasn't the only one available. In terms of U.S. national interests, it may not even have been the best policy decision. From my personal interests in it, I fully support it!

Q: It reaches a point where national policy be damned and what about me?

We're up to November fourth, 1979. Could you talk about that day?

TOMSETH: Yes. As I mentioned earlier, we had previously scheduled this meeting in the foreign ministry to talk about the status of this residual military group in the embassy. Bruce Laingen, our charge, and Ann Swift in the Political Section were scheduled to attend that thing. Again, as I mentioned earlier, Ann was late getting back into Teheran because of car trouble, so I wound up going to the meeting in her place. When Bruce and I came out of the meeting, Mike Howland, one of our two security officers who had gone along with us, had just received over the car radio word that the embassy was under attack. We actually got into the car and started back, but Al Golasinski, the other security officer who was at the embassy, said that we should not do that, that what they needed was help. So, we turned around and went back into the foreign ministry and to the foreign minister's office. Yazdi had not yet arrived back in Teheran from that meeting in Algiers, although he did show up later in the day. So, we initially met with this fellow, Kamal Kharazi, who is currently the foreign minister and then was a relatively recent returnee from the United States who was in the rough equivalent of our under secretary of political affairs position in their ministry. Our request was that the government do what it had done in February, which was send a senior person to the embassy, preferably with force to back him up, to retake control of the embassy and the compound and return it to us. I think it was a measure of just how much authority the provisional government had lost during those intervening eight or nine months when the reaction that we got to that request was, "Well, we'll do what we can," but there were no promises made that someone like the foreign minister would rush to the scene as he had done in February.

The other thing that we asked for in the foreign ministry were for phones. We were talking to people in the embassy over the car radio, but we needed to have better communications than that. We were given a couple of phones in the outer office of the foreign minister to use for that. So, the discussion sort of alternated between repeated requests to the foreign ministry officials for the government to do, in effect, what governments are supposed to do in those kinds of situations, protect the diplomatic missions that are accredited to them, and talking to people in the embassy about what was going on and what they should be doing. We also used one of the phones to set up a line to Washington so we could talk to them.

As I said, Yazdi came back during the course of the day. I don't remember whether that was before Bruce finally gave the last people holding out at the embassy instructions to surrender or afterwards, but it doesn't really matter.

At the embassy, what happened... This was a compound of 20 odd acres. It was most of a very large city block with a number of buildings on it. It wasn't just the main chancery building. It had a separate consular operation in a hardened facility. Actually, it proved to be better designed to keep people out than the chancery, which had also undergone a major upgrade in its physical security after that February attack. But it had the ambassador's residence, the DCM's residence. There were some smaller houses where the communicators lived. And there were a number of other buildings that housed the general services operation, the motor pool... So, there were people scattered all over the compound. In very short order, some of these people who were not in the chancery or not in the Consular Section began falling into the hands of the student attackers. When they came over the fence, it appeared that they were armed with nothing more lethal than clubs and things like that. They very quickly got their hands on weapons from some of the Marine guards that were posted out on points on this compound. They threatened to kill the people that they had captured unless those who were still holding out surrendered. So, finally, Bruce told the last group that was caught in the communications vault of the chancery to surrender.

In the meantime, there was the issue of documents. In diplomacy, no less than in the military, I guess you always fight the last war. One of the consequences of the February attack was that a lot of documents were shredded and others that were then quickly locked up were subsequently removed from the country. We operated in the spring and summer with only a minimal record. And we had gotten the compound back without anybody ever attempting to open the safes that had been closed. So, there was great reluctance to give the order to start shredding this stuff. Probably a half hour went by before people were told to start shredding. Then as it turned out, the volume of paper that was on hand was far greater than the capacity of this rather primitive (in a mechanical sense) technology that we had to get rid of it. So, the consequence of that was that a lot of documents were not shredded. Even those that were went into non terminal shredders. They just cut the things into strips, which allowed the students subsequently to paste them together.

Lastly, which we didn't know until much later (and there has never been an adequate explanation for why), apparently, there were classified materials in the embassy that nobody knew were there, things that dated back years. We assumed that we were operating basically on documents that had been generated subsequent to the February attack, with the exception of some older records that were in the biographic files, but those were not particularly extensive. But obviously, there existed in the embassy an extensive archive that went back several years. The only explanation that I can think of is that in the aftermath of that February attack, even though the security people came in and went through safes and we thought everything had been shipped out to Germany, I think they may have missed some safes. There is one office in particular where I think that might have occurred. That had been the office of the fellow who handled political military affairs prior to February. He was evacuated in the aftermath and never came back. His office was subsequently occupied by the chief of the Military Advisory Group. I think it's possible that Phil Ghast just never had any occasion to open up those safes, so they were never opened. Because he was sitting in the office when the security people came in, they never opened them. I can't think of any other explanation for the volume of documents that weren't even shredded that fell into the hands of the students.

In any event, when the last people surrendered, we had very briefly continuing telephone contact with the embassy and spoke to a couple of these students who had been in the group, but they weren't interested in getting into a negotiation with us and quickly hung up the phone. We called back several times. They would answer, but then shortly after that, they wouldn't even answer the phone when we called. So, we lost all contact with the embassy.

We were talking to Washington throughout this period. After the surrender of the embassy, our negotiation with the foreign ministry (By that time, Yazdi was back.) had shifted a little bit. We kept pressing the point that the government had an obligation to do something about the situation to protect diplomats who are accredited to it. But we also began to press them to allow us to stay in the foreign ministry. Yazdi said, "You can't stay here. It isn't safe for you." Bruce would say, "On the contrary, our view is that the only safety we have is in your hands. You have an obligation to protect us." That went on for a number of hours. Finally, about eight or nine in the evening, Yazdi conceded the point that they were obliged to protect us and he said we could stay overnight in the foreign ministry. We would be their guests. He also said that there would be a meeting of the government and this rather shadowy Revolutionary Council that was dominated by the religious leadership that evening. He was confident that, by morning, things would be sorted out. What happened the next day (not first thing in the morning, but in the next day) was that the provisional revolutionary government collapsed and Iran no longer had a government as such, although in fairly short order the Revolutionary Council did appoint people to be responsible for the various ministries. Initially, a fellow named Abdul Hassan Benasad was the person put in charge of the foreign ministry. He was subsequently elected president in the first elections after the constitution was completed in 1980, but ultimately fell out with Khomeini and is now in exile in Paris, where he had been in exile during the Shah's time. We were able to get a hold of Ayatollah Beheshdi, who was on the Revolutionary Council, this mullah I spoke of a little bit earlier. We talked to him both about the situation at the embassy compound, but by that time the initiative from the Washington end to send Ramsey Clark and Dick Miller out to Teheran and we sought his agreement that they should come, which we got. Subsequently, we spoke with others that he designated as the people we should deal with in terms of getting the aircraft into Teheran. As I said earlier, Miller and Clark had gotten as far as Turkey before Ayatollah Khomeini, who was down at Qom, issued a statement that didn't forbid them from coming, but said, "If they do come, nobody should meet with them." For all intents and purposes, that was the end of that initiative.

In the first few days, we felt we had some role to play, which was conveying communications back and forth between Washington and whomever we could find in the leadership who seemed to be in a position of some authority. There was also an issue of a few people who were not caught in the attack on the embassy. That included five people who were in the Consular Section. The militants never succeeded in breaking into that building. They tried and at one point got up on the roof and actually broke a window into a restroom and had started to come in through there. There was a Marine guard posted at the Consular Section and he put a tear gas grenade in the restroom and they blocked the door from the outside. After a while, the students seemed to give up. The people inside didn't hear anything more at the doors or on the roof. Dick Morefield, who was the consul general, said, "Okay, let's just walk out of here. We'll do it in groups of three and four. We'll go out through the public door," which was right on the street, "and walk away." So, they started doing that. Five of them actually got away. The rest of them were caught and wound up being held with the rest. But five of them managed to get to one consular officer's apartment, which was only a few blocks away. From there, they called the Iran American Society, which was the binational center operated by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), where there were two Americans, the director of the center and the fellow who ran the English language program. From the foreign ministry, we had called the Iran America Society that first afternoon, so we knew that they were there, and found out from them that these five people in the Consular Section had gotten out.

Additionally, there was a temporary duty secretary who had been scheduled to leave that morning. Iran, like a lot of Muslim countries, required an exit visa. When she got to the airport at about 5:00 a.m., she was told that her exit visa wasn't in order and that she would have to get that fixed before she could leave. So, she had gone back to an apartment building immediately behind the embassy compound that we used as a Marine house and had some apartments for temporary duty personnel and had gone to bed in an apartment on the top floor. Even though the students quickly got into that apartment, when they got to the one that she was in, she hid in a closet and they didn't find her. So, she was there. She had gotten in touch with the Iran America Society. We found out from them that she was in that apartment. So, we were talking to her from the foreign ministry.

Then lastly, the agricultural attache had his office in a building that was adjacent to the embassy compound, but not part of it. That building had a couple of other embassies in it, including the Swedish embassy. He had taken shelter with the Swedes and, again, had been in touch with the Iran America Society. We found out from them that he was there, so we were talking to him. I think during that first afternoon and evening and into the next morning, our expectation was that this was going to be sorted out. So, we were basically counseling these people, the secretary, the five consular officers, and the agricultural attache, to just sit tight for the timebeing. Same thing with the Iran America Society people, although we were telling them that because that was a known location that if it looked like trouble was brewing, they should get out of there as quickly as possible. But during the course of the morning, the secretary, Lillian Johnson, was getting more and more apprehensive about her situation. She was right next to the compound, could see what was going on, in a building that the students had access to. She really wanted to get out of there. Even though we thought she would probably be better off just staying put, in the expectation that there would be some kind of negotiated resolution, we said, "Alright, we'll try to get you out of there." Mike Howland, the security officer, had a couple of Iranian friends who said they were willing to go and try to pick her up. So, they drove their car into the alley between the compound and this apartment building, brazenly walked into the building, went up to the top floor to her apartment, gave her a chador (She was very blond and blue eyed.) and she put this garment over her head, pulled it up around her nose and bit it with her teeth Iranian fashion, and went down in the elevator with these two Iranians, got into the car with them, and they drove her over to the Iran America Society. About five minutes later, after a couple of false alarms, the students showed up at the Iran America Society and took all three of them hostage, took them back to the embassy compound. About two weeks into this, the student group, thinking that they were going to win American public opinion brownie points, released most of the women and most of the African Americans. Lillian was among the people released after two weeks. They flew from Teheran to Frankfurt, where Lillian found her luggage waiting for her. It had gotten on that plane on the morning of the fourth when she had not.

I was on the phone with Kate Kobe, the director of the Iran America Society, when the students showed up and had the not very happy duty of telling her that they should not resist, that they should surrender and go with them. But when that happened, we concluded that we really needed to do something about the five people in the apartment, which was very near the embassy compound. We really weren't worried about the agricultural attache. He was with the Swedes and we figured they would make sure that he was protected. So, I called the British charge and told him we had these five people and asked if he would be willing to hide them in their housing compound, which was way up in northern Teheran, for a day or two until we could get this thing sorted out. He agreed to do that if we could figure out how to get them there. So, Mike Howland called upon his Iranian friends once again.

Q: Mike Howland was where?

TOMSETH: He was in the foreign ministry with us. He called up his friends, who got in their car and went to the apartment, got these five people, and drove them to the British compound. Great people! It's just amazing that they were willing to take this chance.

Q: Unlike other things, here you were, in the belly of the beast at the foreign ministry, but there was no particular feeling that everything was being bugged and it was going somewhere? You relied on the disorganization, the lack of connect, between the foreign ministry and the students who were taking over?

TOMSETH: In the first 24 hours, yes, but we immediately assumed that these were not secure conversations. That became relevant in a couple of days. I think maybe on the second or third day, the sixth or the seventh, the British embassy, which was downtown on a compound like ours, was also briefly invaded, but not occupied. When that happened, the British charge called me and said, "You have to do something about your people. It's not tenable for us to keep them in our compound any longer." As I said, at that point, we assumed that there was at least a possibility, if not a certitude, that these discussions were being monitored. So, the question became, how can we move these people again without compromising their situation. The solution we hit upon was, I kne(end of tape)

Q: You knew a Thai cook?

TOMSETH: Yes. He worked for three U.S. Information Service employees who lived right next to one another in houses in Teheran. At that point, we thought surely this was going to be resolved in a matter of a day or two; all we need is some place to hide them for a brief period of time. So, I called up this cook and speaking to him in Thai asked him if he would be willing to take charge of these people for a few days until we could get things sorted out. He agreed immediately to do that. So, he took charge of the five from the British and put them in one of these three houses that he had access to. They stayed there for four or five days, at which point the students had begun going through Personnel records and figuring out where people lived and going house to house. One day, a group of them showed up at one of these houses where the cook worked. Fortunately, it wasn't the house where he had put the five. But they questioned him about the Americans that he worked for and he said, "Well, as far as I know, you have all of them." After a while, they went away, but he immediately told the five that they probably would be back. The senior of the consular officers, Bob Enders, called his colleague at the Canadian embassy, John Sheardown, and asked John if they might come and stay with him. I guess John's reaction was, "Bob, why didn't you call earlier?" So, Suntai, the cook, helped move them to the Canadians. There they remained until late January, when those five plus the agricultural attache, who in the meantime had joined them with the Canadians, were sort of smuggled out on Canadian passports.

With regard to the monitoring of the conversations, we assumed that there was certainly a possibility that that was occurring, but we didn't get confirmation that, in fact, that was being done until July or August of 1980, by which time our phone privileges had been cut way back. But every couple of weeks or so, they would let us speak to our families in the United States. One day when Bruce was on the phone to his wife, a fellow from Protocol... Protocol had been put in charge of us in the foreign ministry. It was only appropriate, I suppose. This young fellow from the Protocol Department rushed in and said, "Ambassador Laingen! Ambassador Laingen! You must hang up! We've run out of tape." I often wonder about those conversations that I had with the Thai cook, if they ever figured out what language that was.

Q: During these very early days, what sort of reaction were you getting from Washington? Did you have the feeling that they were trying to figure out what to do?

TOMSETH: Well, we were all trying to figure out what to do. As I said, in the first few days, we thought we were still players in a process, messengers for the most part, but players nonetheless. When Khomeini decreed that no one should meet with Ramsey Clark and Bill Miller if they came to Teheran, I think all three of us realized immediately that we had no more role and that whatever was going to be done about this was solely in Washington's hands. I think at that point, too, for the first time, I realized that this wasn't going to be a matter of just a few days, that we were going to be there a while, although I never expected it was going to be more than a year.

Q: Once you realized that you were no longer really players, what did you do?

TOMSETH: Well, that was the major challenge. Life for us in the foreign ministry was a lot easier than it was for people in the embassy. Clear up to the time about three weeks before everybody was released and we were turned over to this student group as part of the settlement that had been negotiated with the help of the Germans and the Algerians, the fiction in the foreign ministry was that we were their guests, but it became obvious that if we tried to leave, we would not have been allowed to do so. So, in that sense, we were hostages, too, but it was more like being under house arrest than being in the situation that people at the embassy found themselves in, where they were really shut off from the world. As the guests of the ministry, they gave us a radio so we could listen to Voice of America, BBC, and things like that. I was allowed to sort of go out into the outer room where the Iranian security guard was to watch the local evening news with them. We had phone privileges, unlimited for several months. We got newspapers. The ministry itself provided us with "Le Monde" and "The Herald Tribune." We could get the local newspapers. Depending on the conditions, people were allowed to come in and see us, mostly diplomatic colleagues, but in fairly short order as various do-gooders jumped in to try to resolve this situation, they were allowed to come in, too. We had a rather startling variety of people that way, all the way from this right wing republican congressman from Idaho to Hilarian Kapuchi, who was the Maronite Catholic that the Israelis threw in jail for gun running, and Kurt Waldheim. It was really quite a crew that marched through there over the months. They were allowed to come in and see us. But the real challenge for us and for people in the embassy was to get up in the morning and "How do I get through another day? What do I do to fill up the time?" We found a variety of ways to do that. In very short order, some of our diplomatic colleagues started sending in books. Reading was a major timekiller. When the first box of books came in, my reaction was to look through it and see what titles or authors looked interesting, but in fairly short order, when a box came in, you looked for the thickest ones first. It didn't matter who wrote them or what they were about. Somebody sent in some paints. It turned out that Bruce was a fairly talented artist. Somebody sent in a kind of multipurpose gameboard. It had some chess pieces. Mike Howland knew how to play chess, as do I, so we played chess. I taught the other two backgammon. We had cards and played a lot of "hearts."

Q: As you were listening to the news, were you surprised at the reaction in the United States or did you see it making any sense?

TOMSETH: I guess the thing I found most surprising was not that there was an immediate outpouring of support for the administration in its effort to resolve this thing. I think that is the way most Americans react to any crisis no matter who the president is. But what was surprising was the length to which it was sustained. Americans tend to get bored fairly quickly. This went on for over a year.

Q: 444 days.

TOMSETH: Yes. If the reaction of the reception we got when we got back to the United States in January of 1981 is any indication, it didn't seem to have really diminished much at all during that period. So, that was a surprise.

Q: What about at the foreign ministry, did you become guests who became sort of a pain in the neck? How did this work?

TOMSETH: No, not really. As I said, Protocol was put in charge of us. Initially, the chief of Protocol was an old school diplomat, a very cultured, very refined, very decent sort of person. He would come in at least every couple of days or so to chat with us and try to cheer us up. But over time, virtually all of the people from the old regime were replaced by more revolutionary types. So, that relationship didn't become hostile, but it wasn't as friendly as it was initially with some of these old school diplomats.

The people we saw the most were actually the guard force. This was the ministry guard force. They were professional military. They were army non commissioned officers. They varied a great deal individually all the way from very strong supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini to people who had absolutely no use whatsoever for the new order. In time, people felt comfortable enough, not in the presence of the colleagues, but with us, talking about these sorts of things. There were a couple of middle aged ladies who were part of the char force and they would come in periodically to sweep things up. They spoke no English, but I would chat with them a little bit. They were certainly not ill disposed towards us. I think, on a personal level, they thought it was not a good thing that we were being kept there. That probably increased over time. Eventually, certainly after diplomatic relations were broken in April of 1980 and the Swiss took over representation of U.S. interests there, the ministry would allow somebody from the Swiss embassy to come in once a week for about an hour and they would bring mail. So, we started getting photographs of our families and pinning these up. These women, who all had families of their own saw that we had families, too. That gave them a more human dimension to the relationship, I suppose.

Q: Were you getting any reaction when we froze funds? Was anybody from the foreign ministry talking to you about "How should we make this approach" or using your expertise?

TOMSETH: In the first few days, yes, but that ended essentially when Khomeini shot down the Ramsey Clark/Bill Miller initiative. The only other time where we got involved at all was in March when it looked like an initiative to sort this out under UN auspices might actually work. By that time, Sadak Khopsaday had taken over responsibility for the foreign ministry. He came down a couple of times to talk to us about how he envisioned this playing out. What it involved was a UN team going out to Teheran, taking testimony from people who claimed to be victims of the Shah's regime, and in exchange for that, the students were going to agree to turn the people they held over to the foreign ministry and they would be brought to the ministry and then they would be turned over to the UN and everybody would fly off into the sunset. Well, that never got any further than taking testimony from the victims of the Shah. But prior to the attempt to implement it, Khopsaday did come down and talk about how from his perspective he saw this thing playing out. But other than that, no.

As I said, outsiders were allowed to come in and see us. So, any number of would be negotiators popped up over the months, including the UN. That included initially three people. There was a Syrian, a Sri Lankan, and an Irishman, who were all jurists who came out. We were always part of the itinerary for these groups. They would come in and talk to us about it. So, we saw those people. But with the Iranians, no. After those first few days, with the exception of that one period in March with Khopsaday, we really didn't have any substantive dialogue with them.

Q: If I recall, wasn't there a threat to try you all as war criminals or the equivalent thereof?

TOMSETH: Yes. It depended with the moment. It ranged from trying everybody, all 60 plus, as war criminals, to individuals. Bruce and I were fairly high on that lisBruce because he was charge d'affaires. In this "den of spies," he was sort of the chief spy. They were interested in me, I think, not because I was political counselor, but because after the February attack to sort of confuse people, we switched offices and I wound up in the office that had previously been occupied by the chief of station. So, I think some of them assumed that I had that connection.

Q: What about the rescue attempt, the Desert One? How did that play from your perspective?

TOMSETH: We were probably, aside from the 40 so people that were on the bus that drove through the middle of the rendez vous point in the Dashdakavir, we were probably the first people in Iran that knew that this had happened. We had a radio courtesy of the foreign ministry and listening to the early morning VOA broadcast, the lead item that morning was that there had been a rescue attempt. Initially, we told security guards this. Initially, they were incredulous, but then it was picked up by Iranian media, too. That had a rather traumatic effect on them. I think they realized that, assuming the rescue plan included the three of us, and they had gotten as far as Teheran, whoever would have been on duty probably would have been dead. Although I have been told that we were included by people involved in the planning process, I still have my doubts. I am not a rescue planner, but to me, the logic of a situation where you have a logistics pipeline 1,000 kilometers long and the end of it is in the middle of this very hostile environment in Teheran where you have 50 people in one location and three people in a location several miles away, you don't divide your force. You go for the most lucrative target. But, as I said, people who were involved in the plan said that we were included, so maybe we were.

Q: Did that change what happened? Did you find yourself with more guards and that sort of thing?

TOMSETH: No. We assumed that all sorts of things could happen, the worst probably being that we would be turned over to the student group. They had made a number of attempts to get their hands on us over the preceding months. It certainly had an impact on the guard force. Our relationships were rather distant for a while, but eventually we sort of fell back into the old patterns. In fact, very little happened to us as a consequence of that. About a week or so before, a table tennis table had been brought up to this room where we lived. It was actually the formal dining room in the foreign ministry. One of our diplomatic colleagues who had been allowed to come in and visit us apparently had complained that we weren't getting any exercise. So, the ministry had brought in this table tennis table for us to use and get some exercise. That was taken away, but that really was our only punishment: they took away the ping pong table.

Q: How did the end game play out?

TOMSETH: Again, the three of us in the ministry because we had access to information usually were fairly up to date on what was going on. Sometime there would be a lag of a week or two before we would get the real inside skinny about something that was going on, but we had a pretty good idea the whole time of what was going on in terms of the negotiating process. So, in probably August, the German ambassador came in and told us that they had been approached as a possible mediator. This came about because one of Khomeini's son in laws had lived in Germany for quite some time and he had a lot of contacts in the German government as a consequence of that. So, we were aware of when that initiative began in the late summer of 1980. Eventually, it was moved over to the Algerians because the Iranians had second thoughts about the Germans' revolutionary credentials and thought the Algerians were fellow Islamic revolutionaries just like they were. In that regard, they were sorely mistaken, as they were about a number of things. But nonetheless, the Algerians took on that role.

A number of things were happening. A constitution was drafted. A president was elected. Finally, a parliament was elected in the early summer of 1980 and it began to meet in the latter part of the summer. But I think the really critical event in this process that made it possible after such a long period of time for a consensus to be built was Iraq's attack on Iran in September of 1980. The lesson in that for Iran was that it was totally isolated internationally. The only countries, despite this absolutely blatant aggression on the part of Iraq, that stood up for Iran were Syria (not because they liked the Iranians, but because they hated the Iraqis), Libya (although tepidly so), the People's Democratic Republic of South Yemen, which then existed, and North Korea. With friends like that... So, over the next few months as this war settled into the pattern that it had for eight years and Iran was desperately scrambling to get spare parts for its F 4s, its F 5s, and its Russian tanks, and having great difficulty in doing it, and getting absolutely no sympathy from the international community, a consensus began to build around the notion that, in fact, time was not on Iran's side in the hostage crisis, that it really was something that they needed to get rid of in order to fight the war with Iraq. When that happened, something the administration had done very early on, which it had no effect at the time and really no effect up to that point, did begin to matter. That was freezing Iranian assets. There were $20 odd billion that were frozen in one place or another. That money had become important to Iran because of the war. So, the final negotiation really boiled down to how much were we worth? I remember one time, probably in December, there had been talk about monetary compensation to hostages when they were released. At one stage in the negotiation, I think it was the Iranian prime minister who said, "We want our $20 billion back before we release the hostages." Washington's reaction was not only "No," but "Hell, no!" I remember turning to Mike Howland when I heard that on the radio and saying, "Well, Mike, at least we know what we're not worth."

But for the three of us, the final event was the deal that was cut through the Algerians, which included that the three of us would be turned over to this student group. They made an initial attempt to take us out of the foreign ministry on Christmas Eve of 1980. That broke down as we were led out of the building to this van they were going to take us away in. One of these students grabbed hold of Mike Howland's sweater and was going to shove him in the van. Mike is a fairly good sized athletic person. He turned around and decked this guy. At that point, the leader of the group, who was a kid, 20 or 21 years old at most, I suppose... By this time, they had all effected wearing military fatigues. It was the middle of the winter, so he had on a heavy jacket. He pulled out a gun that I think probably weighed almost as much as he did and said, "You cannot do that! You must go back upstairs!" So, fine with u"We would just as soon spend Christmas in the foreign ministry as wherever the hell you're going to take us." So, we wound up staying there another week before they came back.

In the interim, the Algerian ambassador in Teheran had had a chance to come in and brief us on where the negotiations stood and assured us that a deal had been worked out that would lead to our release. So, the second time, we went off with these guys. In doing so, I was really confident that barring an accident, by January 20th, they were going to let us gno later than that. I think Bruce and Mike were a little more dubious about that, but in any event, we went with them and they hauled us off to jail for three weeks. "Go directly to jail. Do not pass go. Do not collect $200." Then a night before everybody was released, we were taken from that jail to a place that has been described as "the foreign ministry guest house," but having never been in the foreign ministry guest house, I couldn't tell you whether it was or was not. Everybody else had been gathered there by that point. It was from there that we were taken to the airport on the evening of the 20th and flown out of Iran.

Q: Was the jail a real jail?

TOMSETH: Oh, yes.

Q: Was it run by jailors?

TOMSETH: No, it was in the hands of this student group. I have been told that it was a jail used by SAVAK in the Shah's regime and it could very well have been. But it was a facility for confining people there, there is no question about that.

Q: How did you find the students when they took you over?

TOMSETH: Well, by the time we fell into their hands, it had become ritualistic. They weren't going to let the three of us, including the chief spy and probably his major henchmen, get off scott free, but they never attempted to interrogate us. The whole purpose of it was to sort of give us some revolutionary discipline. That was the circumstance of the jail itself. It was the middle of the winter and there was no heat. It was really cold. The food was really pretty basic. But one of the giveaways that they were getting ready to let us go was when they would bring us our bread and tea in the morning and it came accompanied with Geritol and vitamin pills and all sorts of things like that. They obviously didn't want us getting sick during this period that they were keeping us in detention.

Q: What about the American election of 1980? Did you see this as being a factor? Were you watching this?

TOMSETH: I saw it as a factor, in a sense, somewhat different than, I think, the common view may be, which is that the Iranians were deathly afraid Ronald Reagan was going to bomb them into the Stone Age. I don't think they gave a rat's patootie whether Reagan was going to drop bombs on them. They knew that Carter could have dropped bombs on them and that wasn't the issue as far as they were concerned. But because a consensus had emerged that this was an issue that was working against Iran in a chronological sense, the timing of the transition was very important. I think what a number of them realized was that if they allowed this to slop over into a new administration, that that new administration would take some time figuring out what its approach would be, whether that was a week, six weeks, or three months. Couldn't tell. But it was time that Iran simply didn't have anymore.

Q: We're talking about a war going on the whole time.

TOMSETH: Exactly.

Q: So this was not

TOMSETH: And a war that wasn't going very well from Iran's point of view in the initial months.

Q: I thought we might stop at this point. The next time we'll pick it up, we've really moved to the time you were in jail and you were just meeting with your fellow hostages for the first time. I'd like to get your impressions of what you were getting from them and their experiences that you were hearing and how finally you left and then something about during this whole time your communications with your family and what you were getting from that and how that affected you. Then we'll talk about the homecoming and then go on from there.

TOMSETH: Okay.

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Q: Today is July 28, 1999. Vic, we've got you to when you're in jail, right?

TOMSETH: Yes. Bruce Laingen, Mike Howland, and I went to jail the day or second day after New Year's 1981. That actually followed an attempt on Christmas Eve to move us out of the foreign ministry which aborted. But in the meantime, the Algerian ambassador had been allowed to come into the foreign ministry and brief us on where they stood in the mediation process aimed at trying to get some kind of a resolution. So, when this student group arrived the second time to take us away, I think all three of us had had a chance to make some kind of an assessment of where events were heading. For my part, at least, I was fairly confident that this was all just part of the end game and that barring some kind of an accident, by the 20th of January, which was the date that the administrations would change, we were all going to be set free. So, being turned over to this group and going to jail was noat least for mnearly as traumatic an experience as it might have been at an earlier point in the crisis. During those approximately three weeks that we were at that jail, there were various signs that, in fact, that assessment that this was just the final stage preparatory to releasing everybody during those three weeks there were a number of things that happened. The behavior of the student militants indicated that that indeed was what was going to eventuate.

Q: This was the first time you were up against these militants. Often, as time goes on, people change. Do you think they probably changed and became a different group than they had been at first?

TOMSETH: During the course of the year plus that this had now been going on, there had been some personality changes. From our position in the foreign ministry, we were aware of thosat least in a general sensbecause we did have occasional visitors who would come in and tell us about what they perceived to be happening. We did have access to the local media. We had a daily Teheran newspaper. We had a radio. In the evening, I would go out into the little anteroom to the area where we were living and where this group of military NCOs who provided the security force at the foreign ministry had their main base. They had a television set in there, so I could watch local television with them. It was clear that there had been some personality changes in the group. But the core group was very much intact. But a lot of things had happened in the intervening 14 months that very much affected the attitude of these people. Not the least of those events was the war with Iraq. A number of them when that war began saw the war as a higher priority than whatever it was that they were trying to accomplish through prolonging the hostage crisis. When we were taken to this jail, in conversations that I had with several people, that was quite clear. At least some as individuals wanted to get rid of this because they were anxious to volunteer and go to the front.

I think another factor that had begun to impinge increasingly on some of these people was, they were students, after all. Notwithstanding the view in some quarters, most of these people were 19 21 year old college and technical school students in Teheran. A number of them had begun to realize that being hostage takers wasn't necessarily furthering their education and professional objectives in life. Again, in jail, I heard several of these people complain about the fact that they had missed more than a year in their education. There was actually one rather funny event in jail that brought this home. A couple of them came to me because I could speak Farsi and they wanted help with English, but they wanted somebody who could explain points of grammar in Farsi to them. I asked one of these fellows, "Why are you studying English? It doesn't seem to me that that is going to be of any particular use to you in your Islamic republic." He said, "Well, no, it's important for my studies. In fact, I would like to go abroad to continue my studies. I would like to go to the United States." I said, "Well, aren't you afraid if you went to the United States that somebody would take you hostage?" This young fellow said, "I hadn't really thought of that, but maybe I should."

Q: While you were watching T.V. with the NCOs, you were there when Iraq attacked Iran?

TOMSETH: Yes, I remember it very well.

Q: It would be very interesting to hear how a group of professional military people were viewing this attack.

TOMSETH: The war for Teheran started about 1:30 2:00 in the afternoon on September 22, I think. We had just had lunch. The weather was quite nice. It was moving into the fall period and had gotten a little bit cooler. By that time, we had developed some fairly complex personal relationships with some of these people that we saw every day. Mike Howland, who was one of the two security officers in the embassy and with Bruce Laingen and myself at the foreign ministry, had gone up on the roof. You could get to the roof of this three story building from the area where we were held. He had gone up there with one of these NCOs to get some sun. While they were up there, the security person had a new weapon that he was not terribly familiar with, a sidearm. But Mike knew it. So, they had taken the thing apart and Mike was showing him how to put the thing back together. Just as they were doing thathe foreign ministry was about a mile or a mile and a half northwest of Merhabad Airport, the main airport in Teheratwo Iraqi jets came in and bombed the airport. Then as they were flying out to turn to go back to Iraq, they came right by the foreign ministry. Bruce and I were sitting in the room just below where Mike was up on the roof. Looking at that out the window, it looked like they were flying at just about the level of the foreign ministry. I think they were probably a little bit higher than that, but they were quite close. It was quite evident what had happened, that they had bombed Merhabad Airport. But up on the roof when that happened, this Iranian army NCO who was putting the weapon back together threw it up and pieces went everywhere. He said, "Oh, my god, I'll really be in trouble now if we can't find this thing and put it back together. This is official issue equipment." So, he and Mike were scrambling around the roof trying to find the parts to his weapon. Bruce and I were downstairs and immediately surmised what had happened. A couple of the other security people burst into the room. They weren't sure what had happened. So, we had a discussion with these people.

Q: I would have thought the immediate reaction would have been that these are American planes.

TOMSETH: No. Tensions with Iraq had been building up in the days previous. I don't think that among that group anyone suspected that it was Americans. But the real question in their minds was, would Iraq actually dare to carry out a daylight bombing raid on Teheran? The answer to that was, yes, they would. But in the immediate aftermath of it, minutes after it happened, I recall that Bruce and I, joined by Mike and the other fellow on the roof when they found all parts to the gun, came down discussing what this was and coming to a consensus in fairly short order that, "Yes, indeed, those were Iraqi jets that just bombed your airport."

Q: What were you getting from this group about feelings towards Iraq just before and as this thing went on? Was Iraq becoming the Great Satan?

TOMSETH: There has never been any great love lost betwee(end of tape)

These were professional military people in the foreign ministry that provided the security force. I think their immediate reaction was "How dare these dirty Arabs attack us. We will quickly teach them a lesson." But in the early stages of the war, it didn't go very well for the Iranians. They were not well prepared for it. I guess my own reaction was, of all the potential enemies that might have attacked Iran at that particular point, it would have to be the Iraqis, who themselves are... Subsequently during the war with Iran, they proved themselves tenacious on the defense, but the Iraqis haven't had much of a military reputation for offensive operations since the time of Nebuchednesser, I think. Given the disarray that existed in Iran at the time the Iraqis attacked, it should have been fairly easy to roll on through Khuzestan in the southwest corner of Iran. It was late summer. It's ideal tank country. And the Iraqis never penetrated more than about 50 kilometers into Khuzestan and then only after long, protracted set piece battles. They didn't perform very well at all. But from the Iranian point of view, I think there were a couple of things that became evident quite quickly. One was that they did not have the capability of throwing the Iraqis back quickly because of the disorganization in Iran. The other thing, which ultimately was very important to resolution of the hostage crisis, was, they found they didn't have any friends internationally. Here was about as blatant an act of aggression on the part of Iraq against Iran as you could ever hope to find and yet the only countries that immediately jumped to Iran's defense in this were North Korea; the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which still existed at that point; Libya, although not with a great deal of enthusiasm; and Syria, not because the Syrians liked the Iranians, but because they hated the Iraqis. And that was it. The rest of the world sat on its hands on this one. The conclusion increasingly as the rest of the year wore on among the Iranians was that this hostage crisis was largely responsible for it. It was critical in providing a catalyst which led to the emergence of a sufficient consensus in Iran to wrap this thing up.

Q: Did the spare parts of American... Did you ever hear any reflection of the problem that they had a lot of American equipment?

TOMSETH: It wasn't just the American equipment, but that certainly was a constraining factor in Iran's ability to counter this attack. By that point, it was a year and a half since the collapse of the Shah's regime. Even in the months prior to that, there wasn't a great deal of attention being paid in the military to exercising, maintenance, and that sort of thing. So, yes, they very quickly ran into very severe shortages of spare parts, not only for the American equipment, but for other systems that they bought (French, Russian, whatever).

Q: When you got to jail, were you able to talk to your colleagues at this point?

TOMSETH: They separated us and put us into individual cells. We did not see one another the entire time that we remained in that jail. We were aware, however, that the others were there. The way it was set up, there was a corridor with cells on either side of it. The restroom was down at the end of the corridor. To go to the bathroom, you had to summon one of the jailors. We could hear when one or another went down the hall to go to the bathroom, but we were not able to talk to one another.

Q: How did you find the guards? Were these still students?

TOMSETH: All of the guards that I saw while in jail were college students. I don't recall that... There were a few people a little bit older who had insinuated themselves into the group after the seizure of the embassy who had an importance in terms of the group policy, but I did not see any of those people.

Q: Were there any young Ayatollahs involved?

TOMSETH: This group had a cleric who was their senior mentor. He showed up at the embassy several times. We saw him on television more than once when he was over there, but he never appeared at the jail while the three of us were there. In the last nearly 48 hours, they had moved us out of the jail and taken us to where everybody else, as it turned out, was located by that time. We didn't see anybody in the policy position while we were there either.

Q: How did the end game work out for you?

TOMSETH: I guess it must have been about a day and a half or so before we were released in the evening of the 20th. We were moved from that jail to this building that some people have speculated was the foreign ministry club. I had never been to the foreign ministry club, so I couldn't tell you. But it was not a jail and it was a lot more comfortable than jail had been. Bruce and I were then put back together at that point. Then the night of the 19th, I guess, I think that was the second night we were there. I think we were taken there the night of the 18th. During the day, they had given us shaving gear so we could clean up. Then the night of the 19th, they came and got Bruce and me individually. As it turned out, the first thing when I was taken out of the room was, I was taken to a room where there were some medical people. They had some medical equipment. I was given a very cursory physical exam. All this while, one of the students who had taken me out of the room and led me down the hall blindfolded to where these people were was there, but at one point, he stepped out of the room for some reason. All of these medical people had been talking to one another in French. Based on what we knew about the Algerian role in the mediation effort, I presumed that they were Algerian. So, when this fellow stepped out, my French is not terribly good, but I know enough to have been able to ask these people, "Are you Algerians?" They said, "Yes." That was enough for me. That was pretty clear something was going to happen very shortly. Then after that physical examination, I was taken in to... A moment ago, I said we didn't see any policy people, but in fact, this was the one occasion where we did. There was a young woman who had been a high school student in Philadelphia and who was referred to as Mary by a lot of people, including the international media, after a while. I think her name was probably Maryanne or something like that. She is now a vice president of Iran. She was interviewing each of these people and it was being taped on video. Her questions basically were "Have you been well treated during your time in our charge," that sort of thing. But as I was being led in for that interview, I met John Lambert coming out. This was the first time that I or any of the three of us had seen any of these people since November 4, 1979. We just passed in the hall, I said, "Well, hello, John. How are you doing?" He said, "Well, I think I'm doing okay." End of the conversation for the moment. Then I proceeded in for this interview with Miss Mary. I don't think I was a very cooperative interviewee. I wasn't abusive, but when she asked me had we been well treated, I told her I didn't think being held hostage for 15 months was particularly good treatment under any circumstances. I think a lot of people who went through this process did essentially the same thing. As a propaganda technique, it must have been a dismal failure for them.

In any event, I went back to the room and Bruce and I spent the rest of the night there and most of the next day without anything happening. Then about 5:00 p.m., one of these young people sort of burst into the room and said, "You must get ready. We're going to the airport in 20 minutes." Bruce and I both said, "We need our shoes. This was a technique that they used on everybody. They took their shoes away to impede escape attempts. So, this fellow disappeared and about 10 minutes later came back with a whole bagful of shoes and dumped them out. We rummaged around there. Bruce actually found his, but mine were not there. I said, "My shoes are not here." He said, "Wait one minute" and off he went and 10 15 minutes later came back with another bag of shoes and dumped them out. I rummaged through those and they weren't there either. I told this fellow, "My shoes are not here" and he said, "Well, are you sure you had shoes?" Yes, I went to this meeting at the foreign ministry barefooted a year plus ago. But eventually, I found a pair that more or less fit, so I took those. At that point, there was still a lot of scurrying around. Twenty minutes went by. An hour went by. Eventually, I suppose close to three hours went by before they finally got thing sufficiently organized that we were taken out blindfolded and put into vehicles and taken off to the airport, where everybody was sort of run through a little gauntlet that, I think, appeared on international television later, up to the gangway.

Q: The gauntlet being what?

TOMSETH: Student militants who were shouting "Death to America" and "Death to (all sorts of people)" as we went through. I know several people said they sort of answered back as they went through. My attitude was, "Look, I'm leaving. You guys are staying here. I don't really have anything to say to you at this particular point." But everybody got on to the airport. Then there ensued a lengthy process. There were Algerians on board. There were Red Cross people on board, I think. There were some Iranian foreign ministry people that I recognized. They several times went through to make sure that everybody was there. That in itself probably took 30 45 minutes. So, by the time we got underway, it was well past 9:00 p.m. and was sometime after the actual swearing in ceremony had taken place in Washington.

When I got back, there were a lot of people who told me that the Iranians purposely dragged this out until Carter was out of office and Reagan had been sworn in. Frankly, I don't buy that. I think the 20th was very important. The actual hour that we took off was far more a function of disorganization on the Iranian end than it was a sense of purpose on their part to drag this actually into the Reagan administration. I think they did want to humiliate to the last possible minute Carter and his administration. There was no doubt about that. But I really don't accept the premise that the release was delayed purposely to slop over into the Reagan administration. When they came in about 5:00 p.m. and told us we had 20 minutes to get ready to go to the airport, I think they really meant that we had 20 minutes to get ready for the airport. What they didn't realize was, they weren't ready.

Q: During all this time and even earlier, were there further attacks on Teheran by the Iraqis?

TOMSETH: Oh, yes.

Q: And were you concerned that this thing was going to screw up things? Even at the airport...

TOMSETH: No, not really. There were a number of air raids on Teheran in September/October. They may have even extended into November. But over time, they dwindled away. You don't do much damage with two aircraft. I think virtually ever raid had a very limited number of aircraft. I never saw more than four and usually it was two that would come in. They would drop a bomb here or there. There was a refinery just outside of Teheran. They tried to hit that with modest success. I think they bombed the airport at least once again after that initial raid. No, we didn't worry that this was going to screw things up. I suppose we might have been a little bit concerned, given the skill of these Iraqi pilots, that they would drop a bomb on us. But we weren't even too worried about that. No, I think we all felt that, in terms of our selfish personal interest, this was a development that was going to lend momentum to the process of finding a resolution to the hostage crisis.

Q: On the plane, this was the first time you really saw everybody.

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: Were you all counting heads? Was there an accurate count of who was held and who wasn't?

TOMSETH: Oh, yes. I think long since that it had been figured out how many and who they were. After the April rescue attempt, I don't think anyone ever had a very clear idea on where people were at any given moment in time. But the presumption was that, by that point, there were 52 people left. That is what the Algerians and the Red Cross were determined to establish, that they had 52 Americans on board. They had a manifest and they were checking off names as well, but I think probably the number was more important than the names. They figured if they had 52, they had everybody. Yes, I think, for Bruce, Mike, and I, and the others, too, you sort of had a mental roster in your head that you were checking off people as you greeted them on the plane. But I think the focus among the group was not so much on counting as reestablishing the human link with colleagues. Not only for the three of us or the other 49 as well, they had not seen most of the other people either in the intervening 444 dayl guess with a few exceptions. There had been a couple of Christmas dos which most people were allowed to attend, but it really was the first opportunity for most of them to see and to talk freely to everyone else as well.

Q: What was your impression of the condition of them as you established contacts? You had been isolated and, all of a sudden, you see them.

TOMSETH: As I have said earlier and I always stress to everybody, the conditions in which Bruce, Mike, and I lived in the foreign ministry were far better than anything our colleagues at the embassy had to endure during their captivity. But very early on, because we had access to media, I remember, in "The New York Times," there had been a series of articles... I think Steve Pachenik, who is a psychiatrist and at various times has been a consultant to the State Department and actually was in a State Department position for a while in the Bush administration was one of the sources that whoever did this series in "The New York Times" had relied upon. Pachenik's immediate assessment was that "If this thing drags on for more than a few days, every one of them will be vegetables. They will all succumb to the Stockholm Syndrome," which is named after this bank robbery in Sweden in the 1970s where it went awry and the robbers took a number of staff into the vault and held them there for a couple of days and, to the surprise of people when the thing was resolved, by the end of this crisis, the staff people who were being held by these bankrobbers had almost totally identified themselves with the robbers, with the people who had taken them hostage. At the time those things appeared (We got them in "The Herald Tribune" in the foreign ministry.), they just made me maand I think the same with Mike and Bruce, tono way on God's green earth were we ever going to identify with these people. But our conditions were a lot different than they were for people at the embassy. I was prepared to see among this group of people at least a significant number of them who might very well have succumbed to the Stockholm Syndrome over a period of nearly 15 months. But in fact, I think all three of us, what we thought we found on that airplane was that most people had been quite strong. They had dealt with this very effectively. As difficult as it had been, they came through it in remarkably good shape in a psychological sense. It wasn't universally true. There were a few people who obviously had had a very difficult time during their captivity who did need some professional counseling help for a period of time after they were released. But by and large, the most overwhelming impression I had of that group, seeing them for the first time in over a year, was how remarkably strong the were in a psychological sense.

Q: How did the flight out go?

TOMSETH: That was great! On the way to the Turkish border, we had an Iranian Air Force escort, which I think people were of two minds about. The Algerians, in a precautionary mode, had brought two aircraft in and did not decide until the last minute which one they were going to use to actually ferry people out. Then both planes took off so that there would still be some uncertainty as to which plane actually had these people. It didn't take too long to get to the Turkish border. But I remember when finally we got underway and started moving down the tarmac to takeoff position, there was a great cheer in the cabin. Then when we went down the runway and got airborne, there was another great cheer. Then when we passed over that Turkish frontier, there was a third great cheer, at which point the Algerians on board broke out bread, wine, and cheese, and there was a great cheer for that as well. Then there was a brief refueling stop in Athens before we moved on to Algiers where the actual transfer from Algerian custody to U.S. custody took place. But that whole flight, particularly after we got out of Iranian airspace, was celebratory.

Q: Were you mixing and mingling?

TOMSETH: Yes, everybody was up and moving around and exchanginI started to say "stories;" I'm not sure it was storieinformation. In my own case, one of the people I talked to first was Tom Hearn, who had had a particularly difficult time because of his Agency affiliation, which was found out right away. Tom had come in the summer of 1979. He got there in July, I think. His previous post had been Nigeria. In those months up the embassy takeover, he and I used to have friendly bantering discussions as to which nation was the most deceitfuthe most difficult to work witthe Nigerians or the Iranians? I had been in Iran for three plus years at that time and was often very frustrated at trying to get things done. Tom insisted that as difficult as the Iranians were, the Nigerians were much worse. So, when I saw Tom on the plane, the first thing I said to him waand having in mind how difficult it had been for him with the Iranian"Now, tell me, Tom, do you still think the Nigerians are more difficult to deal with than the Iranians?" He thought for a moment and said, "Yes." So, he hadn't lost his sense of humor.

Q: Were you all looking for people who really might have been in difficult circumstances psychologically? This was you all's responsibility in a way. Were you looking at that?

TOMSETH: Yes, that was certainly the case to a degree. In a couple of cases, I think we had a pretty good idea who might have been most vulnerable. Tom was one of those people. We knew that he had been identified and that he had been held in solitary confinement for a long period of time. But he was one of the strong people. There were a couple of others who, for one reason or another, we thought or even knew had had a difficult time. One was Barry Rosen, the press attache. He had been on television a couple of times complaining about his physical well-being and his mental well-being. Another was Steve Lautenbach, who was a very young first tour junior officer who was in the general services operation in the embassy. He had come in the late spring. So, he had been in Teheran for maybe five or six months. Bruce and Mike, too, had all seen a fair amount of him. He was having a hard time even before the embassy was taken over. So, yes, we were concerned about how well had he done and what was the state of his mental health after all of this. He wasn't in terribly good shape. He was one of the people who did need some counseling help, but he, as far as I know, is still in the Foreign Service. He went on and recovered from this and has made a career of the Foreign Service.

Q: Good for him.

TOMSETH: So, even he, as difficult as it was for him, I think, made a full recovery.

Q: Did you find any bitterness? You were at the executive level. Did you have other people there saying "How did you guys get us into this" and that sort of thing?

TOMSETH: Well, I know this is something thanot so much because he was worried that people were going to blame him for getting them into this, but because he felt a great sense of personal responsibility for thil think Bruce was very much concerned about that aspect, that he... He can speak for himself. He has spoken for himself. I'm sure you've already talked to him. But this whole thing was something that weighed very heavily on him. Maybe people weren't saying everything they felt to my face, but I didn't find an inclination on the part of anyone in the embassy to hold senior management in the embassy accountable for this.

That was not the case with the Carter administration, however. There were a lot of people who were very critical of the Carter administration for the decision to allow the Shah to come to the United States for cancer treatment and not do anything in Teheran other than to ask the government to do what governments are supposed to do in the case of diplomatic missions accredited to them. As you probably know, Carter came to Wiesbaden. I can sort of understand why he wanted to do it, but it wasn't a very happy occasion. Some of these people who did hold the administration responsible for what had happened were pretty forthright in telling him, expressing their views. Maybe it made them feel better. I'm sure it made him not feel very well and I'm not sure what purpose it served.

Q: Obviously, people were coming out bitter. My understanding was that you had a certain amount of pressure coming from both Rockefeller and from Henry Kissinger on letting the Shah in. So, it wasn't really a Carter thing. There were a lot of forces in the United States coming from all sides.

TOMSETH: Undoubtedly, David Rockefeller and Kissinger were the most prominent among the friends of the Shah in the United States, of which there were manDemocrats and Republicanwho throughout the spring and summer of 1979 put a lot of pressure on the Carter administration to do something about the Shah's situation. That became politically irresistible when it became public knowledge that the Shah had lymphatic cancer and he needed better treatment than was available in Mexico at that particular juncture.

Q: How did the handover and all go in Algiers?

TOMSETH: Actually, it was the high point of U.S. Algerian relations. It was very moving kind of thing. The Algerian foreign minister, who died a few months later in a plane crash, made some very nice remarks. Warren Christopher had come as the senior U.S. representative. He gave a very nice response and there was then an opportunity for our group and the people who had come from Washington and the American embassy, who had a contingent there, to mingle with the Algerian government officials, most of them foreign ministry people to be sure, who had been involved in this. It was a real love in and was very moving, I must say. It was a high point in U.S. Algerian relations. One of the ironies of all of this was that initially, it had been the Germans who were in the mediating role, just by a fortuitous happenstance. One of Khomeini's son in laws had some German contacts and it was through them that in the summer of 1980 the Germans got involved. But then the Iranians weren't all that comfortable with the Germans. They really wanted an Islamic revolutionary part in that mediation role. They asked if the Algerians couldn't take the Germans' place in this regard. That is how the Algerians came in. But the irony of this is that the Algerians, at least those government representatives involved in the mediation effort, were revolutionary, yes, but Islamic, no. Their interest in doing this was not as a favor to Iran, but because they saw it as their opportunity to improve their relations with the United States. It was a major filip to U.S. Algerian relations.

Q: Could you talk about the processing? You had your love in in Algiers and then went off to Wiesbaden?

TOMSETH: Yes. We went on a U.S. military aircraft to Frankfurt and then they bussed us to Wiesbaden, which is 30 or so minutes away. By the time we got there, it was the early hours of the morning, I suppose, local time, which was a couple hours behind Teheran time. None of us had had any sleep for over 24 hours. But all of the staff at the base in Wiesbaden and at the hospital turned out. There was a big crowd at the airport in Frankfurt. But one of the things that struck me about Wiesbaden was, it was quite clear that the intention of everybody was to be as nice as possible to this group that had been brought in. There were all sorts of things: food, all the back issues of the news magazines, videotapes of news broadcasts, they had set up a phone bank so you could get on the phone and talk to your family in the United States (no restrictions on how long)... But they sort of shut us off from the rest of the world. I know my objective was "Let's get back to normal as quickly as possible." I won't say I resented it, but I didn't appreciate being put in this cocoon, as nice as it was, in Wiesbaden.

Q: Wiesbaden has been used for hostages and all. I don't know what the feeling is, but this is how they've been operating. There haven't been any occurrences recently, but that cocoon... This is what people have gotten who have gotten out of Lebanon as hostages. They put this up, I think, out of the goodness of their heart, but also they're not quite sure...

TOMSETH: I think most of it was well intended. I think there was also an operational concern that they wanted to be able to do both a substantive debrief of people before they got caught up in everything. Okay, I understand that. But most of it was driven by good intentions. The idea was to sort of ease people back into normality, but certainly for me, I felt, as nice as the conditions were there, that it was sort of like "Hostage Crisis Stage Two." Well, it didn't last very long. It was just a few days. But in very short order, I was anxious to get out of there. One of the things... Al Francis, who had been my mentor as a junior officer in Thailand some time before, was then the political advisor or foreign policy advisor to EUCOM. He had come up to Wiesbaden and was at the hospital when we got there. He had secreted in a six pack of beer. That is what everybody needed. They needed to have a beer!

Q: I think we tend to overwhelm people with counselors and with smiling nurses and all this. When you're talking about adults, they're adults.

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: What were you getting from your fellow embassy people about how they had been treated? By this time, you had had a chance to mingle and talk with them. What were you getting from them?

TOMSETH: I don't think that we were terribly surprised in the aggregate about what it had been like. So long as we were in the foreign ministry, we actually got a great deal of information, essentially as much as anybody else had, regarding what things were like for people there. When Richard Queen, who was this young junior officer who had come down with multiple sclerosis and had been released in the summer of 1980, got back, he had a lot of information that he was able to give people in Germany and Washington about what it was like. In due course, the three of us in the foreign ministry had access to that information as well. What was new information were the individual specifics that people had to tell about their personal experiences during that period of captivity. But again, while that was new information, there were no revelations in terms of the overall picture that the three of us had had of what it was like for them. I then and certainly subsequently have had occasion to get to know even more people who were held as POWs in Vietnam. I think without question, the physical conditions that people endured in Vietnam were, in aggregate, far more difficult than hostages in Teheran. By that, I mean not the three of us, but the others who were held. But from a psychological point of view, I think that life for those people in Teheran on balance was probably more difficult than it was for most POWs in Vietnam. In Vietnam, they at least had some fairly regular communications that gave them a sense of what was happening in the outside world, but these people really underwent a very high degree of sensory deprivation, if you will. They had very little news about what was going on in the world, particularly in the first six months or so that they were there. In the first three or four months, there was almost no contact with one another. They might be able to see one another, but they weren't even able to talk to one another. I think that psychologically, that must have been very difficult to endure. That again is one of the reasons why I was so really pleasantly surprised to see how well the vast majority of people had stood up under these conditions. They really, as a group, were remarkably strong people.

Q: Had anything prepared you for this hostage thing? All of us who had been in the military at least had that name, rank, and serial number training. When I was in the Air Force, I got very little, but at least you were kind of told what to do, discipline, and all that. Had there been anything in your Foreign Service experience that prepared you for this?

TOMSETH: Not really. Up to that point, the State Department had not done a lot of institutionalized training for dealing with terrorism, at least in a general sense. I think certain individuals who were going into particularly difficult situations might have gotten at least some briefings prior to doing that. But we don't live in a vacuum. By 1979, there had been enough terrorism about in the world that anybody who reads the newspapers and watches the evening news had some idea of what it is like to be a victim of terrorism, to be taken hostage. I suspect that everybody was able to draw on that to a certain degree.

But in my own case in response to your specific question, I think probably the thing that helped me the most was not anything I had gotten in training or experience in the Foreign Service, but rather being a Peace Corps volunteer, not that being a Peace Corps volunteer was like being a hostage. What that had done for me at a relatively young age without a great deal of any kind of experience other than growing up in smalltown Oregon was show mthat I could live in fairly spartan conditions. It taught me how to be dependent upon my own resources for dealing with that. That, I think, was very useful. As I think I said earlier, the great challenge of going through this thing was the boredom, answering the question that you woke up with every morning: "How do I get through THIS day" and thinking up ways to fill up that time. Again, by virtue of that Peace Corps experience in Nepal, where there wasn't a lot of external stimulants that came to you as you sat there passively to entertain you. You had to think of things to stay busy and keep occupied. That probably was more relevant than anything I had experienced in the Foreign Service to that particular situation.

Q: When you were in Wiesbaden, what about debriefing? Also, did you feel that there was any attempt to make sure you didn't get out and make some outrageous statements or something like that? Was there the public relations spin?

TOMSETH: No. In my own case, quite the contrary. In this cocoon that they had put us in, that included keeping the media out. But there was a fence around the hospital and people, even though it was January and was pretty colthese were people who had spent a great deal of time indoors over the last 15 monththe very first day people were out walking around the grounds of the hospital and these media people were shouting questions across the fence. Some of these people who were rather bitter about the Carter administration's handling of not the hostage crisis, but sort of getting them into it, were shouting sound bites back. There was a feeling in some quarters that this wasn't very good press. Not in really any terribly organized fashion, but in fairly short order, there was a consensus of people from Washington (Bruce was involved in it. People in Wiesbaden...) that maybe what we ought to do is make a few people available to talk to some of these media people in depth. I was one of the persons chosen to do that. I drew CBS, I think. So, I actually got off the compound as a consequence. Morton Dean and I went for an hour and a half ride while they did this interview. It was an opportunity for several people in the group (Ann Swift was one of them, as were two or three others.) to really talk about the experience in some detail, rather than to shout these one liners across the fence to people asking questions. So, at least in my case and the case of a few others, no, it was quite the contrary. The hope was to try and get some kind of multidimensional picture of what things had been like out to the media in fairly short order.

Q: I take it by this time there was no particular concern that "We don't want to upset the Iranians because of diplomatic relations?"

TOMSETH: No.

Q: You're shaking your head.

TOMSETH: I don't think there was any... Certainly not in the new administration. There was no visceral inclination to be nice to the Iranians. The actuality was that in those very early days, I don't think the Reagan administration had really thought through what kind of a policy it wanted towards Iran. The basic attitude that I encountered to a degree when we were in Germany, but certainly as soon as we got back to Washington, was, this was something that happened on Carter's watch and the less we have to do with it, the better.

Q: Coming back to the United States... At some point, you might want to talk about how this hit your family.

TOMSETH: My family had left with most of the U.S. government dependents in early December of 1978, almost a year before the embassy was taken over by this group. I had been back to see them a couple of times during that period. In fact, I had just come back from one of those conjugal visits when the decision was made to admit the Shah to the United States. I think I got into Washington on a Friday (Maybe it was Thursday night.) and was scheduled to leave for Teheran that evening. Henry Precht, who was then the country director for Iranian Affairs, was also going out to Teheran. We were on the same flight together. When we got to Teheran, he told me that that Friday, the decision had been made to admit the Shah. He said he had thought about telling me before I got on the plane, but decided to wait until we were in Teheran. But when my family left, they went to Oregon and initially stayed with my mother. But within a few weeks, it became apparent that they weren't going to be able to go back anytime soon. So, we wound up buying a small house in Oregon. My wife and our two children lived there until the late summer of 1980, at which point my wife decided that she wanted to come back to Washington, where most of her friends were. She is not from Oregon.

Q: This is very difficult. She is Thai, isn't she?

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: Being there in Oregon, there is not a big Thai community. I would have thought it would be difficult under any circumstances.

TOMSETH: Well, you have to know my wife. She is not terribly dependent upon the Thai community wherever she goes. She likes Thailand just fine and she has lots of Thai friends, but she has far more American friends. So, the size of the Thai community in Eugene was not a factor for her. But being close to people that she knew the best, Foreign Service friends, and particularly after the seizure of the embassy, rather than spending hours each day on the phone talking to people in the State Departmenwell, she was going to have to do it on the phone largely when she came to Washington, but it was a lot more convenient to do it in Washington. She decided that she would rather be here for as long as it was going to take to sort this out. So, in August of 1980, she moved the children back to the Washington area.

In Oregon, the media were relentless in tracking down family members of people in Iran, wherever they were. Some of them chose to develop really intimate relationships almost with these people. There were a few where the media people almost moved in with them. My wife, even though her father was a journalist and owned a couple of newspapers in Thailand, didn't really care to have a whole lot of truck with these people. While they were still in Oregon at one point, she came out of the house one morning to put our son on the school bus and there was a media truck with a group of reporters who stuck microphones in her face. She said, "I don't have anything to say to you" and she called the police. They were very good. They came by the house at regular intervals to make sure that she wasn't being harassed by the media. But she had relatively little to do with the media, whether during her time in Oregon or after she moved back to Washington.

Again, our circumstances were different. One way or another, we had a regular stream of communications with our family members, initially by phone any time we wanted it, but even at the end or almost to the end, prior to going to jail, by letter and occasionally even by phone.

But I thought during that time that for the family members of the others particularly, in a way, it was almost more difficult for them than it was for their hostages. As difficult as it was for the hostages at any given moment, they always knew what their individual circumstances were, as hard as they might be. The family members didn't. They didn't have a lot of information. I think that must have been awfully difficult for these people to deal with.

Q: I've had a long interview with Sheldon Krys, who was the point person

TOMSETH: He was executive director in

Q: Executive director of NEA. He was talking about the difficulty of dealing with a very difficult situation and it was something that really happened that was part of the standard operating procedure for the Department of State. What were you getting from your wife when you came back about how the support system worked?

TOMSETH: Walapa and Sheldon became very close during that period. Her view is that the State Department in general made every reasonable effort, particularly in circumstances where there wasn't any standard operating procedure for dealing with situations like this, her view is that the Department made every reasonable effort to try to ensure that the families were kept in the information loop, that whatever information the Department had, they would try to share that just as quickly as possible with the families. She thought that Sheldon in particular was a real rock in terms of being always in touch and supportive of people, certainly in her own case. He was in touch with her all the time, even when she was three hours away out on the West Coast. Others I know didn't necessarily feel that way. There were some who were quite critical of the State Department and thought that compared to Defense, for example, a lot more could have been done. From my perspective, I think that people who feel that way are overlooking some key facts, one of which is that the Defense Department has resources that the State Department doesn't have to deal with this. One of the things Defense did was they assigned somebody as each family's liaison officer. That person had responsibility for daily contact with their family. What is overlooked, I think, is that Defense has a lot more people to draw upon than State.

Q: Particularly when we're not fighting a big war, what do you do with all these people? We are essentially fighting a war every day all over the world. I think you're also talking about an era which is different than maybe 30 40 years ago. That is, you've got to blame somebody and the government is the person to blame. This is true in almost everything. It's an attitudinal thing.

TOMSETH: Yes. We're all victims.

Q: What was your impression of how she felt about the family support group here in Washington?

TOMSETH: Particularly after she came back to Washington, she was relatively actively involved in that, not as prominently as a few people like Louisa Kennedy and even Penny Laingen, who were much more in the public eye, as was Catherine Keo. Bill Keo was actually the headmaster at the International School in Islamabad who had come over to look at some things that we had gotten just a week or so ago before from the International School in Teheran, some band instruments particularly, and wound up being caught in this, but was not an Embassy Teheran staffer per se. But Catherine Keo, his wife, and Louisa Kennedy particularly, and Penny, to a degree, and some others were very much in the public eye.

Q: Louisa Kennedy was Morehead Kennedy's wife.

TOMSETH: Right. I think she felt that this was a good thing for developing a sense of solidarity and mutual support among family members. In Walapa's case, one of the things that she was particularly concerned about was that the tendency was to think nuclear family (wives and children), but maybe not so much brothers and sisters and parents and in laws. My wife was very concerned that my... My father had been in a nursing home and he died while this was underway. She was very concerned that my mother be kept in this as well. The State Department organized several family meetings around the country during this period. I know on a couple of those occasions, she asked if my mother could go to that rather than going herself. I think they may have gone to one or two of these things together.

Q: Then we come back to Washington. This is an important nationaalmost internationaoccasion. Could you talk about what happened?

TOMSETH: Yes. After a few days of medical checks and debriefings in Wiesbaden, we went to West Point as initial landing in the United States. The spouses came up to West Point for that period. I guess we were there for a couple of nights. Then we came down to Washington. I think for me, coming in to Stewart Air Force Base in New York and then driving the 20 miles or so to West Point, in a way, was a more impressive experience than coming down to Washington a couple of days later where there were throngs of people. It seemed like everybody in Washington was out on the street. But this area in New York is fairly rural. It was the middle of the winter. And yet the whole 20 miles was lined with people to greet these buses as we traveled from the air force base to West Point itself. For me, that was more moving, seeing all of these people out in rural New York than large numbers of people in Washington, DC, where you are much more likely to find large numbers of people, let alone the tickertape parade that they had in New York a week or so later. But all of those things represented a single phenomenon and that is the way the American public united around this hostage crisis issue. There probably aren't very many events in a historical sense where that sort of thing happens.

But coupled with that was... This wasn't apparent on the first or second day, but certainly within a couple of weeks, it was clear that as joyous as everybody was that this had worked out well, they wanted to move on. It was "Okay, we've done this and now it's time to move on." Again, at least for me, that very much accorded with my own wishes. I had no particular desire to become a professional hostage. I wanted to get on with my Foreign Service career.

Q: When you got back, did you get any impression about how Washington (the State Department, the White House, and all that) was dealing with you?

TOMSETH: I think you have to make some distinction between the State Department on the one hand and the administration on the other. As I said a moment ago, I think the attitude of the Reagan administration was that this is basically something that happened on Carter's watch and the less we have to do with it, the better. That was evident in the White House ceremony the day that everybody came back from West Point. It was a nice, moving ceremony, but I had the distinct impression that Reagan and his political people viewed it as something that they needed to get done and over with, that it wasn't anything that they were doing with a great deal of enthusiasm. The same thing happened a few weeks later in the State Department when, after a decision had been made about what they were going to do to recognize these people and the decision was made to give everybody the Certificate of Valor, Haig was Secretary of State... It was the same thing. He showed up late for the thing. He wasn't very well prepared in terms of his remarks. The overall impression that you had of him making these remarks was, let me get through this just as quickly as I can. So, you had that on one side. That was a bit disappointing, although I can understand it from a political point of view.

The State Department, on the other hand, institutionally, the Department's inclination was to do everything it could within reason for these people. What that translated into in terms of the assignment procesand I think you also have to couple with this the attitude that was evident in Germany, which is, these are damaged goods in a psychological sense. You have to put a protective cocoon around thewhat that meant for virtually everyone was that they were put into training assignments of one sort or another. I went to the Senior Seminar. Several people went off to university training and things of that sort. Senior Seminar is a great program and I hope it lives a very long life, but I'm not sure that that is what I needed at that particular juncture.

Q: In a way, it's somewhat passive.

TOMSETH: It is.

Q: You're getting back and you've been kept passive for some time.

TOMSETH: The other thing is that most of these training assignments begin in the summer. My advice to junior officers is, if you're ever going to be taken hostage, don't get released in January. You're out of the assignment cycle, at least of a lot of these training assignmentwell, for most assignments. What that meant for me and everybody else was a series of make work assignments to fill up the five or six months before going into the Senior Seminar in August.

Q: A real dead space for an active person.

TOMSETH: It was, although one of the things I did was go on the speaking circuit. I talked to university groups and rotary clubs. I really enjoyed it. It was nice to get out and see a lot of the country, but it was good therapy. too.

Q: What were you saying? What was your message?

TOMSETH: What people wanted to hear about was what it was like. So, my remarks were focused to a large extent on what it was like because that is what they wanted to hear, but the message I was trying to get across was, this is basically something that can happen in the process of international relations and that as a nation and the State Department as an institution, you cannot let the emotion of an event like this really drive the foreign policy. The policy should be based upon what national interests are and in the case of Iran, there is a national interest that we really shouldn't lose sight of. I think we've had a very difficult time keeping that national interest in view over the last two decades. But there have been people all along and it's sort of come to the fore again recently as some people have hoped that what is happening in Iran itself may, if not immediately, at least eventually, present an opportunity to sort of move on. But it's always been difficult. During the Reagan administration, one of the things that happened... After the Senior Seminar, I could go up in NEA in an office director position. Going to the weekly bureau staff meeting and seeing what was going on with the Iran Iraq War at that time was very disheartening. The basic policy of the Reagan administration was "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." I always felt that just because we've had a falling out with the current leadership with Iran doesn't make us friends with Saddam Hussein. That's not a bed I would ever want to get into. But we did to a very large degree during the course of the 1980s.

Q: Alright. We'll come back to that. One of the very basic themes of this whole oral history program is to build up an institutional memory and to make it useful for policy planners. Did you find when you came back (and using others' experience) that there had been an effort on the part of the State Department to say, "Okay, let's look at how we dealt with Iran?" How could we have done it better? What lessons were learned? By inference, whither our relations with Iran? Here you came back, you were a Farsi speaker. You had been in the beast.

TOMSETH: Not a lot. The one effort I recall (and this was actually a couple of years or smaybe even more than thaafter the fact), INR used some of its money to do a series of seminars in which they got some academics and State Department personnel and other experts involved to look at the cultural dimension of politics. Iran was one of the case studies that they did. I thought this was very good. In Iran, I don't know how cogently or eloquently, but both prior to the collapse of the Shah's regime and then in that period from February up to November of 1979, I tried to make the argument that what this revolution is about in a very significant sense is cultural issues. What had happened in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s particularly was that a ruling elite with the Shah at the top of it had, in effect, made themselves as alien to the majority of Iranian culture as all of the foreign experts that they had brought in. Khomeini's message to a lot of Iranians was not so much a religious message per se, but a message that said, in effect, look, the great danger of the Shah's regime and the West particularly (even more so than the Soviet Union) is that Iran is in danger of losing its soul, that if it goes the direction the Shah wants to take it, it won't be Iran anymore. It will be sort of an ersatz France, Italy, or the United States. It won't be, in a cultural sense, that thing that is important to you and me, the real Iranians, as opposed to this westernized elite that sits at the top of the political power structure.

Q: Did you see at the time or since a way for the Department of State to analyze how things went and to make corrections? The military at least may be accused of fighting the last war, but what they do do is analyze the last war, what went right, what went wrong, and try to make adjustments for that. Did you see anything at the time? This was a major political diplomatic disaster however you want to talk about it. Did you see any effort to respond to this?

TOMSETH: Very little. One of the things that happened ex post facto, after the seizure of the embassy in Teheran, was with regard to our relations with Libya. A decision was made that circumstances are just getting so difficult that we're going to close down the embassy. We didn't break diplomatic relations. We closed down the embassy. I would like to think that the experience in Iran had some bearing in that course of action, but aside from that, I really saw very little that suggested a serious effort to try to analyze or discover what are the lessons learned from this Iranian experience. Part of that may be that the resolution of the hostage crisis coincided with a change of administrations, that if the Carter administration had continued in office, there might have been a greater willingness to go back through this and see what are the lessons that we can draw from the experience, but I didn't detect much of an inclination in the Reagan administration to do that. As I said, the overwhelming attitude from the very outset seemed to be that this happened on Carter's watch and the less we have to do with it, the better.

Q: Did you find in your talking to groups around the county an inclination to say "Let's go out and bomb the hell out of them" or get revenge?

TOMSETH: No, not really. The one thing that I encountered fairly regularly that I tried to argue against was the notion that this was resolved because the Iranians were afraid of the Reagan administration, what Reagan was going to do to them that Carter wouldn't dare to do. I think that is nonsense. The Iranians, given the psychological mindset in Iran at that time, I think they were perfectly prepared in a rhetorical sense at least to face anything that the United States was going to throw at them. If nuclear weapons started coming down, their minds might have changed in fairly short order, but they weren't in a mood to be intimidated by military threat. The personality of the president had nothing to do with that. It didn't matter whether it was Carter or Reagan. What really allowed for a resolution of the crisis was a consensus that emerged in late 1980 that time wasn't on their side in this, that they really needed to get rid of this albatross, particularly to prosecute the war with Iraq. Yes, there was an inclination to humiliate Carter to the maximum extent possible. Yes, the 20th of January became a very important date because of the change of administrations, but not for the reasons that a lot of people seem to ascribe to it.

Q: What was your impression of the books, the treatises, that have been written about this from either the academic press or something like that about the situation?

TOMSETH: I have not read all of the books that have been written on this period. Particularly in the last few years, there have been several that have come out, a few of which I've read, but not all of them by any stretch of the imagination. I think the ones that were done at the time or in the immediate aftermath without exception are not very good. Some of the ones that were done more recently... I think of one that James Bill did maybe six years ago is pretty good. It's pretty dispassionate in its analysis.

Q: So often, when I talk to Foreign Service people who have been involved in events, they said, "You just got it wrong." Again, part of what we're trying to do is get the feelings on the ground. Often, they ascribe emotions, plans, etc. to Americans who were doing things that just aren't true.

TOMSETH: Yes. Among people who were writing at the time is Nikki Keddie, who is very interested in the cultural dimension of politics. She wrote some articles and a book or two in the late 1970s. I thought she had a lot of insight into the Iranian cultural personality, if you will. But the straight political science kinds of things that were done at the time and in the immediate aftermath of it, I don't think were really terribly good.

Q: Did you get any feeling about the Iranian community in America during this time?

TOMSETH: This wasn't the Iranian community in America, but in the early summer, June or so (It might have been after the Iran Iraq War started.), a group of Iranians took over an embassy in London. I think it was the Iraqi embassy. It's possible they did that before the war started, but it was probably after. In any event, this thing went on for a few days before it was resolved. In the meantime, there were all sorts of Iranian students out there demonstrating and being pro and con. There was a joke that started circulating in the UK that one of our British colleagues got brought into us in the foreign ministry and it was a question: water covers 7/10 of the surface of the earth? What covers the rest? The answer was: Iranian students.

Q: I know. As a consular officer in Belgrade and Naples during the crisis when you were being a hostage, I got a call from the visa office saying, "Would you like to have Iranian students come from all over to use your facilities?" I said, "Hell, no! I don't want to touch them with a 10 foot pole."

TOMSETH: "That is an honor we'd rather decline." There were a lot of Iranians here. One of the things that the Carter administration did after the embassy was seized was direct INS to do a census. They came up with over 50,000 here on student visas. God knows how many actually were here. These were students, let alone the others. We know lots of very decent Iranians in Iran and in this country, too. I think life wasn't particularly easy for a lot of Iranians in the United States during that period through no individual fault of their own, although collectively the Iranians have a great capacity for being their own worst enemy. Some of the demonstrations that were going on in the United States in the aftermath of the seizure of the embassy were not well calculated to win the hearts and minds of the American public.

Q: Was there any thought at the time that maybe we made a mistake and we should have taken, as we did during World War II, the Iranian diplomats in the United States and at least put them in the Greenbrier Hotel or someplace like that?

TOMSETH: Well, there was some discussion of that. I don't know how serious it ever became, but certainly in the early days when we had regular telephonic contact with Washington, we had the impression that there was actually some consideration here in Washington being given to the idea that the embassy staff would be interned and that that might then provide a basis for some kind of negotiation for an exchange.

Q: In a way, looking at this, this would allow fo(end of tape)

You were saying the conclusion...

TOMSETH: The conclusion that was reached without a great deal of difficulty is that what might have worked in World War II and previous international conflicts was not going to work in this situation because of the particular nation of the psychological dimension of the situation in Iran itself. Interning the embassy staff here wouldn't have had the least bit effect on the group that had control of the embassy staff and would not have been very likely to have much influence on the religious leadership, particularly Khomeini, to make some kind of decisive intervention that would, in effect, overrule the views of the student group at the embassy.

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Q: Today is July 30, 1999. We're at the Senior Seminar.

There is just one question I want to ask. Did you have the feeling that people were watching you carefully, not just professionals, but people in the Foreign Service, to see if this guy was going to break or do something or did that pass pretty quickly?

TOMSETH: If it existed at all, it didn't last very long. I certainly wasn't much aware of it. I think there was an interest for a time among the professional counseling community, including the element in the Department of State that tracks that sort of thing in the Medical Division, in how people were doing. It certainly was reflected in the assignment policies I mentioned the other day. But, no, I felt that in fairly short order as far as most people were concerned, it was time to move on to other things.

Q: One of the things that had been levied against the Foreign Service early on (We're going back maybe 20 years when this hostage taking and kidnaping started taking place, particularly with ambassadors, but also with others.) was that they found when they came back that people tended to treat them a bit as pariahs. There had been a lot of literature on this and talk within our Service about how we were treating this. This was before your time. I think we had a much more sophisticated crew. I remember, Diego Asencio was brought in and given a good job right away after he had been taken hostage in Colombia.

TOMSETH: Right. No, I didn't detect any of that, this phenomenon of blaming the survivors of the ship for the shipwreck. No, not really. I certainly didn't run into that phenomenon.

Q: Let's talk about the Senior Seminar. I am a graduate of the 17th Senior Seminar. This was what year?

TOMSETH: This was 1981 1982.

Q: What was your impression of how it was run and what did you get out of it?

TOMSETH: Jack Perry ran it. He had been a member of the previous year's Seminar. I don't know that our class was the first, but for budgetary reasons, they had done away with the foreign travel aspect of it. I remember some years before when I was in Bangkok and then later on in Iran that we would get people coming through on these trips. I guess what they had encouraged people to do was to go to parts of the world that they had not previously served in. By the time I came along, the focus was much more on the interplay of what was happening domestically in the United States on the foreign policy and national security policy processes. As a consequence of that, the travel that the Seminar did was all within the United States, if you count Puerto Rico as a part of the United States (That was about as far afield as we got.). The special project that people in the Seminar did... You could choose what you wanted to do, but you were asked to try to pick something that had a domestic policy, foreign policy, national security policy nexus. I guess one of the things that struck me about that group was that... This was 1981 1982. It was the first Seminar in the new administration. There was what seemed to me a disproportionate percentage of people who were in the Seminar because they had been doing something in the latter years of the Carter administration that the Reagan administration was going to do differently. So, we had several people who had been very much involved in Central American policy in the Carter administration who were in the Seminar because the new administration obviously was not prepared to let them continue what they were doing or give them another job immediately in the area where they had been working. Several other people had been in positions where they were close to senior members of the State Department team in the previous administration: Rocky Suddarth and Arnie Raphel. Rocky had been Peter Tarnoff's special assistant. Arnie had worked on Warren Christopher's staff. So, they wound up in the Senior Seminar because they were a little bit tainted by what they had done in their previous assignments.

Q: The Reagan administration when it first came in was probably more suspicious than most. We always had that problem. We had Tom Boyatt, who was kept out of Henry Kissinger's eye because he had gone against him over Cyprus as a relatively junior officer. I think this was a more almost vindictive group in the transition period. It took a little while to settle that out.

TOMSETH: Yes. Actually, that was the first time that I had been in Washington at the time a transition between a Republican and Democratic administration had taken place. In 1968, I was in Bangkok and in 1976, I was in Iran. But without the basis of comparison of having been in Washington before, it certainly seems to me that this new crew came in with a very suspicious attitude towards professional government servants. I don't think it was exclusive to the State Department, but to the notion that you could have a professional government servant who is prepared to serve any administration or adhere to the professional discipline of leaving if they felt they couldn't serve.

Q: You had already done a good bit of public speaking, so for you, probably the exposure to the American public out beyond the Beltway around Washington was not as much of an experience as others. Did you or your group find this useful to get away from Washington worries and think about other things?

TOMSETH: Well, in terms of just exposure to America beyond the Beltway, I suppose that the speaking that I had done in the spring and summer of 1981 in a way accomplished some of what the Senior Seminar was trying to do. But it wasn't really the same. The Senior Seminar program events that were set up were very consciously chosen. There was some kind of domestic policy, foreign policy, or national security policy nexus. So, we visited military installations; we went to areas and visited companies that had a particular role in the national economy; those sorts of things. For me, that was probably the most interesting part of the Seminar, to go to Parachute, Colorado, for example, which because of the energy crisis was going through one of its periodic booms in speculation on what oil shale would mean for U.S. energy. Those kinds of activities I found very interesting and useful in terms of where domestic policy fits into the formulation of foreign policy.

Q: In your exposure with the Senior Seminar and also your public speaking, you couldn't help but be tagged as "one of those hostages." There was so much... It's probably hard for somebody looking at this as a historical event to understand how much this absorbed the American public. On T.V. every night, the news commentators were saying they had been held hostage for so long. I was wondering, in both the Seminar and the speaking, did you find people willing to ask you to discuss "Where do we go from here with Iran" or was it mainly "Well, let's forget about those bastards" or something like that?

TOMSETH: I think the overwhelmingly predominant attitude was, "This crisis has been brought to an end and the hell with them. Let's hope the Iraqis kicked their butt." As I said last time, in the public speaking I did, I tried to get audiences to focus a little more dispassionately on the position of Iran in terms of American strategic interests, certainly in that part of the world, but globally as well, and to suggest that as traumatic as this experience had been for the country that that was not in itself a reason to ignore these fundamental national foreign policy interests that we had in the region. That included a role for Iran in trying to pursue those national interests. I don't know that I made a whole lot of headway in terms of getting through.

Q: I'm just sampling the feeling at the time.

The Senior Seminar was over in June of 1982. Whither?

TOMSETH: I had been interested in getting back into Southeast Asia, so in the Personnel process that was underway while the Seminar was ongoing, I had focused on possible positions either in the East Asia and Pacific Bureau or overseas. None of those turned out. Almost at the last minute, there was an unexpected vacancy in the Near East and South Asia Bureau in one of the two South Asian country officethis one for India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. So, I wound up going into that job for the next two years as director of the Office of India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Q: This would be from 1982 1984?

TOMSETH: Right. The office was INS, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, although it also covered Bhutan and the Maldives.

Q: This was still within the Near Eastern Bureau, wasn't it?

TOMSETH: Yes, this was before the Steven Solarz bill that carved South Asia off as a separate geographic bureau, although Solarz was, even at that time, very active in pursuing doing something like that, but it didn't happen until some years later.

Q: Did this concern you, being that you were still within NEA and almost a side theater to NEA, in a way, because when you think about NEA in those days, you think about the Arab Israeli problem and everything else is secondary.

TOMSETH: The whole time that South Asia was part of the Near East and South Asian Bureau, it was very much a stepchild. Arab Israeli affairs did dominate the attention of the assistant secretary and the bureau as a whole to a very, very high degree. It was extremely difficult for the deputy assistant secretary who had responsibility for South Asia and the two office directors to really get much attention for their parish as compared to other parts of the bureau. For me, going to that office was sort of coming full circle in terms of how I started out in the Peace Corps in Nepal and what I had studied in graduate school. It was a very interesting time in terms of U.S. relations with India and Sir Lanka particularly. The Reagan administration had appointed Harry Barnes as ambassador to India. He was the first career person to serve as chief of mission to India since Indian independence. The Indians were initially absolutely aghast that the administration had not sent them a high powered political person, as all previous administrations had done.

Q: They promptly fell in love and were co opted often by India.

TOMSETH: Exactly. But the Indian reading of this was that the Reagan administration really didn't care very much about U.S. Indian relations. They were probably right in that assessment that Harry's appointment as ambassador to India in one sense probably did reflect a general lack of interest on that part of the administration in South Asian affairs. But Harry Barnes is a very dynamic person. In fairly short order, I think the Indians found that they had an American ambassador in New Delhi who was both willing and able to invest a lot of energy in trying to do something with the relationship, which he certainly did. It was really from his tenure that the thrust of American policy towards India began to look more in terms of an economic relationship and less and less in terms of the global relationships, particularly between the United States and the Soviet Union.

So, even though this area was a stepchild within the bureau, in terms of the time, it was an interesting time to be on the desk and I had a substantive interest in it as well. So, I wasn't terribly disappointed that this opportunity had come along. It just sort of delayed my eventual return to Southeast Asian affairs a bit.

Q: Let's take each country at a time. Let's start with India. Who was in charge of India, was prime minister of India at the time?

TOMSETH: Indira Gandhi. Literally, the first piece of business I had as a brand new office director was a state visit that Mrs. Gandhi made in July of 1982. Most of the preparatory work had actually been done by the time I reported for duty, but the actual visit itself took place a few weeks after I was in place.

Q: What were the issues that came up and how did the visit go?

TOMSETH: I think it was a very successful visit. As I mentioned just a minute ago, it really was the first opportunity, certainly at the highest level of the U.S. government, to begin trying to reorient the focus of bilateral relations away from global superpower rivalry, in which India played a minor supporting role, to one that had much more at its center a bilateral economic relationship. That had a number of facets to it as well. India produces more scientists and engineers than any other country in the world, a lot of whom over the last 20 years have been hired by Silicon Valley firms and that sort of thing. So, one of the things Harry wanted to do was to try to develop scientific cooperation between India and the United States. So, getting a science attache... There had been a science attache in New Delhi for a long, long time, but nobody had ever really paid much attention to this. But he wanted to get a really qualified person into that position to try and develop that. This visit that Mrs. Gandhi made in July of 1982 was really the first opportunity at the national level in this country to get people to zero in on this shift in terms of emphasis in the bilateral relationship.

Q: What about Mrs. Gandhi and Ronald Reagan? Mrs. Gandhi had been renowned for being very frosty to Americans who tried to go there (Kissinger, Nixon, etc.), but at the same time, Ronald Reagan didn't strike me as being a person you could get away with being frosty to. He was a very engaging person. How did it work?

TOMSETH: Well, I didn't sit in on the meeting with Mrs. Gandhi and Ronald Reagan, but in terms of the week that she spent in the United States and the interaction that she and her party had with senior Reagan administration officials, it wasn't what one would have expected. Actually, I think Reagan probably deserves a fair amount of the credit for that. The impression I had of their meeting (They had the White House lawn ceremony and then there is a meeting and that is followed in the evening by a dinner.) was that Ronald Reagan charmed her and she was prepared to be charmed. I think you also have to bear in mind that she had been in the wilderness, if you will, not too much prior to that. After declaring the emergency in 1977 or 1978, she had lost an election. For the first time, the Congress Party had been out of power for about a year and a half, when Muraji Desai was prime minister. She had really suffered quite a humiliation in terms of just what she and the Nehru family could get away with in terms of Indian politics. So, I think she came to Washington a somewhat different person than she had been in the late 1960s and 1970s when she was prime minister.

Q: I realize you came in late, but in your contact with the White House, did you have the feeling that by this time this was a White House staff that knew its business and was interested in this? What reflection were you getting?

TOMSETH: In the two years that I was office director, we had three state visits. We started with Indira Gandhi and then the next year we had the King of Nepal and then we had Jayarji Wardnen, the president of Sri Lanka, the last week of my tenure in the office. One of the things I have to say about the Reagan administration, particularly compared to the Clinton administration, was that they were willing to do one of these visits a month. They almost from the outset started scheduling them in a very organized and meticulous manner. There was a real process for looking at what visitors should come. They got on the calendar and made the preparations for them. So, I give that administration high marks in terms of looking after... It's not just protocolary. These visits do have substance to them.

Q: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

TOMSETH: But the protocol of it is important as well. Just the fact of a visit often means a great deal in terms of how the particular country involved views its bilateral relations with the United States. The Reagan administration was good about making sure that that resourcbecause it IS a resource that is available to the American foreign policy apparatuwas effectively utilized. I think it was used more effectively than any previous administration I have seen and certainly more effective than the current administration has used that resource.

That said, everything you've ever heard about Ronald Reagan and his three by five cards is absolutely true. All of the briefing materials that were prepared for these meetings had to be boiled down into a format that made it extremely difficult to have any substance and depth conveyed in the course of those materials. From my point of view, I think the only saving grace in that was that the process of distilling this stuff down to three by five cards was so difficult and you got so many people involved in it that, by the time the visit took place, the echelons down from the Oval Office had been fairly well steeped in the process of putting the substance of the bilateral relationship into this. When the meetings actually took place, there was always somebody around who knew in greater depth than you could put on a three by five card what the particular issues were. So, certainly in the three visits that our office handled in those two years, I didn't get the feeling that the substance really suffered all that much in terms of the bilateral discussions that went on. Somebody knew what they were talking about.

Q: I would have thought that it sounds great about saying "greater economic ties with India" and all that, but India seems to have been stuck with two great impediments to this. One was, they had gotten too much into Fabian socialism from the London School of Economics and that whole thing and a controlled economy. The other one was that they had Gandhi's idea of "Do it yourself," whatever the term India used, but essentially mercantilism... In other words, "We'll do it ourselves and anything we "

TOMSETH: It's autarchy, in a way.

Q: I would have thought that these would have presented you with something to crack these two nuts.

TOMSETH: Well, they haven't been cracked yet. On the first one, in terms of the Fabian socialist background, a lot of Indians, particularly the independence generation that Indian politicians came out of, that still lingers on, although time and what happens actuarially are taken care of. There really is a new generation of Indians who are rising into policy positions through the electoral policy process or the bureaucracy that come out of a different kind of educational background and their views are different. But the idea that Gandhi exploited so well of being dependent upon Indian resources is still very much around. It still has a lot of political potency in India. What that means is that even during the last 20 years, the rate of growth in India has risen only from what a lot of Indians themselves called "the Hindu rate of growth" of about three percent a year barely kept up with population growth to around five percent. If you look at that, five percent is not bad, but if you look at that in comparison to East and Southeast Asia particularly, it's not nearly as impressive as a number of countries in the Asia Pacific Region just a little bit to the east of India. That's been reflected in terms of American and other international investment in Asia during those two decades. It's much more heavily into East and Southeast Asia than it is into India. At the time, I could understand Harry's idea of trying to refocus what the bilateral relationship was all about and certainly admired the energy and determination he brought to pursuing it, but in the back of my mind, I had real reservations about how quickly this was going to be done.

Another factor, quite frankly, is that with all its warts and flaws, India really is a democracy. That makes it difficult to throw overboard some of these policy traditions that they have had, the policy tradition of oligarchy and the suspicion of foreign investment and those kinds of things. The electorate is interested in those kinds of things. Politicians are able to exploit those kinds of things in national elections, which are held at regular intervals.

Q: Of course, there is always the problem of, with administrations, ambassadors, or what have you, arriving on the scene and you want to turn things around immediately when... Maybe you give it your best effort and each one budges it a few inches closer to the goalline or something, but you don't get there right away, although Americans kind of like to think in those terms.

TOMSETH: I don't think Harry had any illusions he was going to do it in his tenure, but he wanted to start pushing the peanut in a somewhat different direction. I think he deserves a lot of credit for it, both in terms of what has happened in terms of U.S. Indian relations over the intervening two decades and also in terms of how administrations have approached the relationship in terms of the kinds of people that they were going to send to New Delhi. I think there has been one or maybe even two political appointees in the last 20 years, but most of them have been very high powered career people. They have been people like Frank Wisner and Tom Pickering after Harry. That has made a big difference in terms of how U.S. policy in the context of U.S. Indian relations is managed.

Q: How did we see the Soviet Indian relationship at this 1982 1984 period?

TOMSETH: I think, at that point, no one really detected any significant shift coming down the line. One of the things that certainly concerned people in Washington at that juncture was that just prior to going out of office, the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan

Q: This was the summer of 1979.

TOMSETH: Yes. Mrs. Gandhi's previous government had been very supportive of the Soviet Union on that issue. So, when she came back into office, I think a lot of people were sort of worried about what that was going to mean, not only in terms of Indian Soviet relations, but how it might affect other U.S. concerns in the region and particularly Afghanistan. But what nobody saw was what was going to happen in the Soviet Union in fairly short order. Long before it finally broke up formally, the effect certainly was becoming evident in Afghanistan and other places as well, but in 1982, that was not obvious.

Q: What was our attitude? Did we see the Indian Soviet relationship, particularly on the military side, as being one of real allegiance or allies or was this one of mutual convenience, but there wasn't any real warmth to it?

TOMSETH: I think the perception of a lot of people was that India had gotten in bed with the Soviets for reasons of practical politics pure and simple, that it wasn't really something that was driven by ideology. But in military terms, it was a very real concern. It tended to exacerbate the imbalance of power in South Asia, if you will. By virtue of that relationship, India had access to the very best of Soviet weaponry and they had an economic means for financing Indian arms imports from the Soviet Union that was a house of cards, but at the time it worked. The Indians in effect were able to do that with rupees. It didn't require hard currency to buy all of this equipment. That relationship had resulted over time, India being overwhelmingly the predominant military power in South Asia. From the point of view of Washington, particularly as our need for fairly close cooperation with the Pakistanis waxed and waned and at that particular juncture, it was waxing because of Afghanistan, that was a real concern.

Q: Were we seeing India at this time as being a potentially aggressive power towards Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or exerting itself in the Indian Ocean or something of this nature?

TOMSETH: As an example of what India could do in that area, during the time I was on the desk and then subsequently when I was deputy chief of mission in our embassy in Colombo, the ethnic problem problem in Sri Lanka really came to the fore. There was no question that Tamil groups, rebel groups, were using Indian territory to prosecute the insurgency in northern Sri Lanka. ThIndians tolerated that. I think they subsequently regretted it because it was one of these groups that blew up Rajiv Gandhi, Mrs. Gandhi's son, when he was prime minister a few years later. But the position of India in that issue made it extremely difficult not only for the Sri Lankans to deal with an insurgent issue on their territory in the way a sovereign nation might like to. I am not addressing the human rights concerns, obviously. But in terms of the ability of the government in Colombo to actually try to deal with this insurgent situation, it was very severely constricted simply by the presence of India and its attitude. It didn't have to invade Sri Lanka to exercise its power in that situation. Just by being there, it could do so. It also affected what other countries like the United States might be willing to do or could do in terms of dealing with that problem in Sri Lanka. And the Indians really weren't shy about throwing their weight around. One thing that Americans heard from Indians all the time and still hear, for that matter, is, "Look, you have your Monroe Doctrine. Why can't you let us have the Indian equivalent of it in this region? Why are you always complaining when we act in our neighborhood the way you've acted in your neighborhood for nearly two centuries?"

Q: Did we have any problem with Diego Garcia while you were there and our base there?

TOMSETH: The fact that the U.S. was going to utilize that facility had been well established by the time I came along. As much as the Indians had complained about it earlier, I think they had come to accept its existence and U.S. use of it. But one of the issues while I was in Colombo from 1984 1986 that came up was how we got aircraft to and from Diego Garcia. Up to that period, all aircraft had flown in from points outside of South Asia itself from Singapore, Thailand, or Australia, wherever. One of the things that we, the United States, endeavored to do during that period was to demonstrate that we weren't going to be restricted to our use of other country facilities as points of transit into and out of Diego Garcia. During that time, we started using (not a lot) both the Maldives and Sri Lanka as a transit point for some of these flights into and out of Diego Garcia. The Indians weren't at all happy about it and were not at all shy in bringing pressure to bear on those governments to not let us use those facilities.

Q: What was your impression of the foreign ministry bureaucracy? It's sad. I know, in some countries, you have foreign ministries who almost represent one part of the spectrum, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right. Dealing with it often is like dealing with a foreign power and then you have other relations. How did you find the Indian foreign affairs establishment?

TOMSETH: They have a very good professional foreign service. It in part is something that they inherited from the British, not that the British had a foreign service that they turned over, but the idea of a professional service with recruitment into it via competitive examination was certainly something that came right out of the old British Indian civil service. Most of the people that I knew in the Indian foreign service, both in their embassy here in Washington and serving in the ministry in New Delhi, were very good. They were very smart, very able, very professional diplomats. They weren't necessarily very representative of Indian society, however. Almost all of those people were high caste and were in economic terms from the elite of Indian society, probably not unexpectedly so, but they really didn't represent their country very well in that sense.

Q: Did they have an attitude towards the United States or towards the Soviet Union tha(end of tape)

TOMSETH: They had a number of attitudes on specific issues.

Q: I might say after I posed that question that there was a long pause.

OMSETH: I was sorting through my mind to try to pick out some examples. Some of them were silly. For example, they had a couple of people in the embassy here in Washington whose only job was to go through U.S. government issued documents looking for maps of South Asia. What they were looking for was how Kashmir was portrayed in those maps. Any map that didn't indicate that all of Kashmir was part of India or at least indicate in some fashion that there was a dispute over some parts of Kashmir, but that India claimed it all, the embassy would come in and register a protest with the desk. The policy on this in the U.S. government had been established years before. The answer was always the same: you can protest until the cows come home, but all of these things have a little notation at the bottom that says "These do not necessarily represent official boundaries." That is just a disclaimer that all the U.S. government mapmaking agencies put on their maps. But they would do it. This was deadly serious for them, no matter how dismissive their protests were received every time they made them.

Another thing was, not so much... I sometimes wondered whether they had learned years before that it didn't get them very far to come in and lecture us on how we were treating the Soviet Union. In my tenure on the desk, I never really heard much about the Soviet Union from diplomats in the embassy here in Washington. But they would regularly try to tell me and my colleagues on the desk that we ought to treat Vietnam much differently than we were. This was one of these relationships that had sort of come out of the 1950s. India had been on the original Control Commission after Geneva in 1954. That seemed to be something that was ingrained in Indian diplomats. After I left the desk and went to Colombo and even as recently as when I was in Laos from 1993 1996, at which time we were actually improving our relationship with the Vietnamese, I would still get lectures from the Indian diplomats in their local embassies about how we really ought to be treating Vietnam.

I think another quality about Indian diplomats that I was struck by during my time on the desk, primarily because it was in such marked contrast to the way the Sri Lankan embassy operated, was their view of what their country was in the world and consequently what they were in terms of their positions within the Indian embassy. The Indians regularly lost out on opportunities for useful substantive meetings in the State Department and other agencies of the federal government because they would insist that if they had a joint secretary coming to visit Washington, that he had to see the under secretary of whatever it was that they were interested in, whether that was Treasury, the State Department, Defense, or whatever. At the Sri Lankan embassy, they had a political appointee as their ambassador here, a fellow who was actually a journalist. He didn't care who he or any of his staff or any of his government officials coming from Colombo met with. They could be the most junior desk officer if it was going to get whatever needed to be done done. The consequence of that was really striking in terms of how senior officials in the State Department, and I think at Treasury and elsewhere, viewed these two governments. Ernest Karaya, the Sri Lankan ambassador while I was country director, became a real favorite of Larry Eagleburger, who was then Under Secretary for Political Affairs because Ernest never insisted on seeing Eagleburger. He would meet with one of his staff assistants if that was what was needed to get whatever it was that he was interested in doing, whereas the Indian embassy in its haughty "If I can't meet with the person who is my moral equivalent in your bureaucracy, I am not going out meet with anybody," produced an attitude in the senior levels of the Department at the under secretary level particularly, that, "Alright, well, I am a busy person. I don't need this meeting."

Q: I think one of the interesting things is how some embassies, really small powers, understand the Washington game. For example, you go over and talk to congressmen and even more so congressional staff and the news media and all. Did you find that the Indian embassy played this game well?

TOMSETH: In my time in the Foreign Service, I guess the local embassies that I have seen most extensively and closeup are the South Asian embassies that I was responsible for when I was director of INS (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka Office)the Thai embassy, obviously, over a long period of time, and the Iranian embassy when there was an Iranian embassy. At that time, Ardeshir Zahedi was the Iranian ambassador here. This guy was a real snake oil salesman, but he was the most effective of any of the ambassadors that I had any occasion to deal with during my career. It is true that he had some resources, too. He had the ear of the Shah and he had money. But he understood how Washington worked. He worked Washington like a very finely tuned instrument. He was very good. The Indians are not terribly good at that. They're not terribly good at working the Hill, for example. One of the weaknesses of the structure of the Indian foreign service, representing as it does an education elite and a social elite and a caste elite, is that they don't relate to American democracy with all its warts very well at all. Their arrogance tends to come through in a lot of situations and certainly in the American congressional situation. So, they were not very good at doing that.

Q: I can't remember when the industrial accident at Bhopal happened. Was that in your time?

TOMSETH: I think I was actually in Sri Lanka. It was in the mid 1980s.

Q: How did we view American factories or American subsidiaries in India at that time?

TOMSETH: At that particular juncture, most of the American companies that operated in India had been operating there for a long time under often very difficult conditions for a foreign investor. Union Carbide was one of those. They had been in India since before independence making batteries and things like that. Notwithstanding this effort that Harry Barnes initiated to reorient the policy focus of U.S. Indian relations towards economic issues. Even by the time of Bhopal, which I think might have been 1985 or maybe even 1986, there wasn't a lot of new U.S. investment in India. This was certainly a company that had been in India for a long time and I think that factory had been there for quite a while as well.

Q: You were saying warts and all. I mean, this is a huge country as far as population goes. It is very diverse. But it is a democracy. How about election or political coverage from your vantage point at the desk? Did you have a pretty good feel for what was going on in India politically?

TOMSETH: Yes, I think so. For one thing, we had then (and still have, I guess) in addition to the embassy three regional consular posts, each one of which had... In the 1950s and 1960s, these had really been quite large posts. The consul general in Bombay was bigger than a lot of embassies. Sometimes the consul general had previously been an ambassador somewhere.

This was Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay, in addition to the embassy in New Delhi. There had been a long tradition of training language officers not only in Hindi, but in Tamil and Bengali as well. So, the mission staff had a fair number of language officers. Some of them were good at getting out. Traveling in India can be interesting, but there actually is a fairly well developed transportation infrastructure, so it is possible to get around.

But I think one of the other things about India is that it is a democracy, as I said. One of the consequences of that is that there is a very active media in India. A lot of papers are published in both English and vernacular languages. It was fairly easy to get a good deal of information about what was happening simply by picking up the paper and reading it.

Q: What about the relationship between our embassies in New Delhi anby this time, where was it? Islamabad?

TOMSETH: Yes, they had been in Islamabad since around 1960 when they moved out of Karachi.

Q: Our relationship is often that these are like two different countries. How did you find the reporting and the relationship between our two embassies in Pakistan and the embassy in India?

TOMSETH: I think they were pretty good. Part of the time I was on the desk, Ron Spiers was ambassador in Pakistan. Then he was succeeded by Dean Hinton. These were pretty strong individuals. But my recollection is that there were no catfights between those embassies or the leaderships of the embassies either when I was on the desk or a little later when I was in Colombo.

Q: How did we portray ourselves in India in dealing with our efforts tbecause they were certainly picking them udeal with the Soviet invasion and attempted occupation of Afghanistan?

TOMSETH: By the early 1980s, we had fallen into a pretty clear pattern, which was that we and others that had joined us were very much involved in supporting the Afghan resistance against the Soviets in Afghanistan. I think that may have been one of the reasons why I don't recall any big fights between the embassy in Islamabad and in New Delhi. In Islamabad, they were really focused much more on Afghanistan than anything else. It was a very operational embassy. They had a big AID program, both for Pakistan and for a couple of million Afghan refugees who were in Pakistan. Then there was this military supply relationship being channeled through Pakistan. In terms of how we dealt with the Indians on that, certainly by the early 1980s, the Indians recognized that we were determined to do that, we had the capacity to do it, and there wasn't a whole lot that they could say or do that was going to change our mind or make us behave any differently in terms of support for the Afghan resistence.

Q: Indira Gandhi had been out of power for a while and back in. You say she was somewhat different. Did you sense a willingness on the part of the Indian establishment not to get too overly supportive of the Soviets in Afghanistan? I would have thought t his would have been of some concern to them.

TOMSETH: I'm not sure I really have an answer to that.

Q: It was just an issue that everybody knew which side they were on and maybe it was not on the front burner at all?

TOMSETH: Of course, at that time, everybody still had embassies in Kabul, including us. The Indian view tended to be, these ragtag rebel groups are never going to be able to drive a superpower out of Afghanistan and you, the U.S., really ought to learn to live with that reality. Our approach was, we'll see. We continued to pour substantial amounts of money into support for the resistance.

Q: Did you get involved in trying to solve the Kashmir problem?

TOMSETH: No. Kashmir was very much a back burner issue during that period. Punjab was much more active. Of concern, particularly here in Washington because this Sikh separatist movement had a figure who lived in London, if I recall correctly... Somehow he had become good friends of Jesse Helms. You may remember that when the Republicans gained a majority in the Senate for the first time from the 1980 election, Helms was the ranking Republican member of the Foreign Relations Committee, but he was also the ranking Republican member of the Agriculture Committee. Because of the salience of tobacco in North Carolina, Helms chose to be chairman of the Agriculture Committee, as opposed to Senate Foreign Relations Committee that time around. Charles Percy from Illinois was the chairman. But Helms continued to like to make trouble in the foreign policy area. One of the things that he did to do this was, as chairman of the Agriculture Committee, he invited this fellow, this Sikh from the independent Holistan movement to come to London to testify before the Agriculture Committee on something or other. That sent the Indians into a fairly high orbit. There were several other incidents like that where we were caught up in trying to put out a local Washington fire set by Senator Helms over the issue othe Punjab. During that time, at one point, there was a group that actually occupied the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In the end, Mrs. Gandhi sent the troops in

Q: Was that during your tenure?

TOMSETH: Yes.With a fair amount of bloodshed. That probably led to her own assassination a year or so later by a couple of her Sikh bodyguardthe way she handled that Golden Temple incident.

Q: Were we concerned about the Sikhs in the United States and Canada, too (I think they blew up a plane.)?

TOMSETH: Not so much in the United States. I am not sure why, but the Sikh community here did not seem to be particularly outspoken on behalf of this independent Holistan movement in the Punjab. But in Canada, there were Sikhs who were much more radical. We would often hear about what Sikhs in Canada were doing. The concern was that that not slop over into the United States.

Q: Did we get involved at all in trying to moderate or do anything abut the Tamil movement in Sri Lanka?

TOMSETH: We were fairly proactive in that. The first real serious outbreak of violence in Sri Lanka occurred in the summer of 1983 mid way in my tenure on the desk. In one sense, there was a fair amount of sympathy to the Jayewardene government because it represented a rather striking departure from the kind of governments that Sri Lanka had had up to his election in 1977. The inclination in Washington was to try to be supportive of the Jayewardene government, including on this Tamil issue, particularly when it often manifested itself in acts of terrorism, but a constraint in that regard was that the government response to that often was not much better in terms of behavior than the Tamil groups themselves. Their military and police forces often behaved in a rather undisciplined fashion. But we, the U.S., were trying to do what we could to encourage some kind of dialogue with responsible Tamil political leaders and pushing on the government a bit to think in terms of some kind of structure through federalism or regionalism that would address a lot of the concerns that a lot of Tamils had, not just the radicals. But that was without a great deal of success. That certainly continued when I went to Colombo in 1984.

Q: Turning to Sri Lankan Affairs, during this 1982 1984 period, was the Tamil problem the major focus in U.S. Sri Lankan relations?

TOMSETH: In 1982, when I arrived on the desk, no, I think not. But at that point, there hadn't been any serious outbreaks of violence yet. I suppose there were a couple of minor incidents. The real focus of U.S. Sri Lankan relations at that point was, we had a fairly large AID program. One of the things Jayewardene had done when he came into office in 1977 was, he had a concept for developing the major river system in Sri Lanka for both electrical generation and irrigation. There was a lot of international money going into that Mahawehle scheme, including a lot of U.S. money. They had also made it much easier for foreign investors to come into Sri Lanka. They had set up a free trade zone out by the Colombo airport. So, there was a big push on the U.S. side to get U.S. investment in there with a number of companies doing that.

Q: Had the movement of American companies to do high labor, low cosmaking shoes, tennis rackets, or what have yobegun by this time?

TOMSETH: Yes. Most of the firms that went into that initial free trade zone that was set up at Colombo Airport were just that sort of thing. They were labor intensive manufacturers for export, a lot of it garments. The U.S. was a major destination for much of this stuff, whether or not it was a U.S. company making it, particularly garments. So, one of the issues that we had with Sri Lanka involved textile calls and negotiations on quotas.

Q: I would have thought that you would run up against somebody like Jesse Helms and others. The garment and fabric industry at one time was quite important in North Carolina. Did you find yourself up against political problems in various sectors of the United States and this type of thing?

TOMSETH: Actually, less North Carolina than South Carolina, I suppose, but, yes, that was constantly there. The domestic political pressure to create as many barriers to the import of these sorts of things (garments), particularly from these low labor cost countries that were going for it... The garment industry is very mobile. It doesn't take a lot of capital investment to set up operations somewhere. They tend to really be birds of passage. They will go into a country and exploit that until often the U.S., but not exclusively so, start slapping quotas on them, raising barriers to their exports, and at the same time, wage costs tend to rise over time in these countries and then they move on. I suppose one can debate whether that is good or bad. I can cite a number of countries that have used that as an initial stepping stone on the road to transforming their economy, so there are merits on both sides of it.

But the thing that struck me in these negotiations was that they tended to be dominated by U.S. domestic constituencies, whether that was labor unions or towns in the south that still had a garment industry or whatever. Often, the State Department found itself in a very lonely position trying to argue "Let's be reasonable about all of this in terms of the effect that it has on the bilateral relationship, what it does for economic development in the country, how much does it actually cost to protect that textile job in the United States?" I remember at one point when I was in Colombo reading a study that suggested that it cost over $60,000 a year to save a job in the garment industry in the United States through import barriers and the other things that go into it. In the mid 1980, I doubt that there were very many garment workers in the south that were making $60,000 a year.

Q: I doubt that. Who was our ambassador while you were doing this in Colombo?

TOMSETH: John Hathaway Reed, who had been governor in Maine and was very active in Republican politics. He had been appointed by Gerald Ford as ambassador to Sri Lanka with less than a year remaining in Ford's presidency. When Carter came in in 1976, John Hathaway Reed had to leave Colombo. Four years later when the Reagan administration came into office, someone asked Ambassador Reed, good Republican that he was, very hard worker for the Party, wathere anything that he would like to do for his county? He said, in effect, "Yes, I'd like to finish my tour in Colombo." So, he was the ambassador in Sri Lanka when I arrived there in 1984. He stayed another year and then was replaced by Jim Spain, a career officer.

Q: How did you find Reed?

TOMSETH: I liked him a lot. He is a very decent person and very good at some things. He was very assiduous, as one would expect from a politician, I suppose, in following up on things. He answered all the mail I got. He would write personal letters to anybody who wrote to him. He was very good about trying to master the Sri Lankan names, which are not always easy, and remembering people. He was good at that.

But he also understood what his limitations were, too. He knew that he didn't know a lot about South Asia and even foreign policy. He relied on his staff to help him out with that. So, as a political appointee, I would certainly rank him among the good ones that I have seen. He didn't have a lot of substance in terms of the U.S. Sri Lankan relationship, but he knew where to get it. I think he deserves a lot of credit for that.

Q: Was he able to because of the political pressures in the United States (tarriffs and that sort of thing) use his political know how to understand how to play that in support of our policy?

TOMSETH: He tried to do what he could. The reality was, there wasn't a whole lot that he could do about that. These domestic constituencies are pretty powerful in that right.

Q: They know what they want and you can't sweet talk them out of it.

TOMSETH: No.

Q: Did you find that Sri Lanka took up much of your time when you were on the desk?

TOMSETH: It was sort of interesting. Of the five countries that we had, Bhutan took almost no time. It is an independent country, but India actually looks after all of its defense business and handles its foreign relations in all but a couple of places. At that time, they had an ambassador in New Delhi and they had a permanent representative in New York and that was it. So, our bilateral diplomatic intercourse was limited to once a year when the foreign minister would come to New York and then make a side trip down to Washington. Usually, when he did that, Howie Schaffer, who was the deputy assistant secretary for South Asia during my tenure on the desk, and I and the desk officer who handled the Bhutanese account would have coffee or go to lunch with him and over the course of an hour or two discuss everything that needed to be discussed for U.S. Bhutanese bilateral relations.

The Maldives was a little more active. We covered that out of Colombo. The ambassador in Colombo was also accredited to the Maldives. But before I came into the desk, there had gotten to be enough business that it had been decided to hire a Maldivian citizen as a consular agent in Mali. So, we had her there. There was also a nascent textile industry in the Maldives, so we had some textile negotiations with them. There, the fellow who had the Sri Lankan account in the office might on average spend two or three days a month doing Maldivian business as well.

Nepal, this was one of these countries that at one point we thought was more important than we thought it was in the 1980s. We probably think it's even less important in the 1990s than we did then. So, the woman who was the Nepal Desk officer often was at loose ends and we would put her to work on Indian issues. There was enough going on with Sri Lanka that that really kept the desk officer for Sri Lanka busy most of the time. Then we had a couple of people who handled Indian affairs full time. So, the office really was dominated by Indian related issues, as one would expect, with Sri Lanka bringing up a distant but fairly active second and then the rest of them there, but not demanding much time.

Q: Did the confrontation between the Tamils and the Sinhalese that got really active during your mid time in this 1982 1984 period put the embassy and the officer in charge of that into a state of crisis or emergency or did we just see it as something to keep an eye on?

TOMSETH: Well, in the summer of 1983 when they had very severe rioting in Colombo itself, yes, we did go into a crisis mode. We were fortunate in that we had a summer intern who we put in charge of fielding... There were a lot of phone calls coming in. Colombo and Sri Lanka had become a fairly popular tourist destination, much more for Europeans than Americans, but there were always some American tourists coming and going there. So, there were a lot of phone calls. There was not a big, but there is a Sri Lankan immigrant community in the United States which tends to be more Tamil than Sinhalese.

Q: They are down in Miami. There is a drug problem down there, isn't there, as far as being drug operators in a small way?

TOMSETH: I am not so much aware of a drug problem in Miami with Tamils, but it did become a very serious problem in Europe. A lot of refugees out of Sri Lanka wound up in Europe. What they would do is, there was an Aeroflot operation out of New Delhi. Lot, the Polish airline, was out of Colombo. They could get cheap tickets out of these flights. They would wind up in Moscow or Warsaw and then make their way to East Berlin, get on the subway, and show up in West Berlin. In fairly short order, one of the ways that these guys would finance that travel was, they would take along a load of drugs as well, so there was a big problem in Europe in that regard. But certainly in my time, that wasn't an issue so much in terms of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in the United States.

Q: Back to the crisis in 1983, you said you had an intern who could take the calls?

TOMSETH: Right. We gave him a desk and a telephone and said, "If we have concerned mothers and fathers or angry Tamils or whoever might be calling in, you field these things. If there is something you can't answer, call on the desk officer to field it." He was a great help to be able to do that.

Q: Did anything develop in Nepal there outside of the fact that you kept a benevolent eye on it?

TOMSETH: Not really. We had the King visit in February of 1985. That was the singular Nepalese during the two years that I was on the desk. There was a constant fight to get money for the AID program. I remember when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal in the early 1960s, the aid program was sort of $25 30 million a year at that time, when $25 30 million would actually buy something. By the early 1980s, when I was on the desk, that had slipped down to less than $15 million a year and was each year being cut back a little bit more. So, each year that I was on the desk, we went through this anguished process of trying to keep the level of the AID program in Nepal respectable. But the reality was that this was a country that more and more people in Washington were concluding really didn't matter too much in terms of U.S. policy interests, local or strategic.

Q: Who was our ambassador at the time?

TOMSETH: Carl Coon most of the time I was on the desk. He was replaced by a political appointee, Lee Weil, just as I was leaving.

Q: It was a natural for you to go as DCM to Sri Lanka, wasn't it, at that point?

TOMSETH: Yes. Certainly in the time that I spent on the desk, it was a job that very much appealed to me. I am not too shy to admit that I certainly lobbied for it.

Q: Fair enough. You did this from 1984 to when?

TOMSETH: To 1986.

Q: Jim Spain was...

TOMSETH: John Reed left in September of 1985. Jim was held hostage by Jesse Helms for a couple of months through no real fault of his own, but he happened to go through the confirmation hearing at the same time Winston Lord did with China. Helms held Lord up for a little bit. So, he didn't get there until about November of 1985.

Q: In the first place, how did Ambassador Spain operate? How did he take to this area?

TOMSETH: Well, he was an old South Asia hand himself. He had had a couple of previous ambassadorial assignments. In fact, he had been ambassador to Turkey in the latter part of the Carter administration. I think what he really would have liked and certainly what he thought was more in keeping with his experience and abilities was to replace Harry Barnes in New Delhi. Occasionally, I would catch him being a little bit resentful that he had been given a post that he thought was a bit beneath him, but for the most part, he took on the job with enthusiasm. He had also had a great deal of tragedy in his personal life in the year or two just prior to this.

Q: His wife and daughter had died.

TOMSETH: His wife had cancer. They were in a very bad auto accident in which his daughter was killed and his wife, who was already dying of cancer, was severely injured and then she subsequently died of the cancer not too long after that.

Jim was a consummate professional. Aside from these occasional lapses of bitterness, he took the job on with enthusiasm and professionalism. In many ways, it was a real contrast to John Reed, whom as I said, didn't have a lot of substance, but knew he didn't and had the advantage of knowing he didn't. Jim did. He knew a lot about South Asia and particulary on some of these more strategic within a regional context issues, he had a very clear sense of what he thought needed to be done. That included the Tamil issue and how you deal with India in that regard. It also included some of these U.S. military related things like transit flights into and out of Diego Garcia. So, in that sense, it was a real change when he arrived. Jim had a very clear idea of where he wanted to go in policy terms.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the Sri Lankan government and where they stood, how they operated, and how we dealt with them?

TOMSETH: Yes. In Sri Lanka, since independence in 1948, there were two parties that dominated the political process there. They took turns defeating one another at regular national elections. The only exception to that was when the last time that Mrs. Bandaranaike was prime minister. She was elected in 1970. During her tenure, they had a very violent, radical Marxist insurgency among Sinhalese that was eventually put down. But during that emergency, they postponed elections so that she was actually in office for seven years rather than the usual five. But they had election in 1977 and the other party won. Both of these parties in the earlier years had pretty much followed the same kinds of policies. A lot of these people too had come out of the London School of Economics in the 1930s, so they had a well developed state welfare system that had driven the country to the verge of bankruptcy, but had produced some results. It was a very literate society. Education was virtually universally available. The healthcare system was good in the sense that it reached most people, not so good in the sense that they didn't have any resources for the physical infrastructure of it. Infant mortality was low. Longevity was right up there among developed countries. But the country by 1977 was a basket case economically.

J.R. Jayewardene, who won that 1977 election, whose party won it overwhelmingly, did several things. One of the first things was that they pushed through some changes to the Constitution and instituted a strong presidency. Before, it had been a strictly Westminster parliamentary system. He then became president as opposed to prime minister.

The other thing that his government did was that they threw out all of these Fabian socialist ideas of how to organize the economy and adopted a market driven approach. They lowered tariffs, created conditions that made it attractive for foreign investorto come in. From 1977 1983 when the beginning of the ethnic problem really came to the fore, the Sri Lankan economy was doing extremely well. It was growing by seven and eight percent a year and there was a real transformation in terms of the economic life of the country, which probably... The causes of this ethnic problem in Sri Lanka are very longstanding. But rapid economic development probably exacerbated the situation in that in many senses, the Tamils in the traditional Tamil areas of the north and east were being left behind by this rapid economic change that tended to be concentrated in Colombo and on the southwest side of the island.

Q: When you were there, what government was in?

TOMSETH: J.R. Jayewardene's government.

Q: He had won again.

TOMSETH: Right. That was the first time that had happened since 1948, the first time that an incumbent party had been reaffirmed in a national election.

Q: How were relations between the embassy and the government?

TOMSETH: Excellent between the Sri Lankan government and the U.S. government. That had been reflected in the fact that Jayewardene had gotten one of these monthly state visits in June of 1984.

Q: What was our view of how the government was treating the ethnic problem?

TOMSETH: I think there were several dimensions to that. By 1984 when I arrived in Colombo, there was an active Tamil insurgency in the north and eastern part of the country. Occasionally even in Colombo itself bombs went off with some degree of regularity in Colombo and elsewhere outside the Tamil area. I think our view was that the government's police and military actions against the insurgents were not helping because the government forces often behaved just as badly as the insurgents did in terms of savagery against innocents. That was an issue in the ongoing dialogue with them, how they really needed to improve the human rights dimension of their police and military actions against the insurgents. We weren't telling them that they shouldn't hunt these guys down, but the way in which they did it certainly needed a lot of work.

Another dimensions was the political dimension. There were a lot of Tamils who didn't necessarily agree that taking up arms was the way to solve this problem, but who felt that there were some real grievances on the side of the Tamil community and that one way of addressing those grievances was through a greater degree of local autonomy in Tamil majority areas in the north and the east. I think that was a view that the U.S. government shared, that you could separate the portion of the Tamil community, which we thought was a fairly a substantial majority if you would make some reasonable concessions in terms of greater local autonomy to Tamil majority regions. That too was part of the bilateral dialogue between the U.S. and Sri Lankan governments.

Again, during that time, without a great deal of success, the attitude of the Sinhalese (Most of the people in the government were Sinhalese. There were some Tamils, but not many.) was that federalism is just the first step on a slippery slope to separatism. They really resisted the notion that making these kinds of concessions would actually alleviate the situation.

Q: What kind of role were we playing? Did you feel that maybe we were trying to act in our good offices? Were we meddling? Were we able to come up with good advice?

TOMSETH: Not meddling. The Sri Lankan government actually wanted us to be much more intimately involved in all of this. One of the things that we were doing, particularly when these ethnic conflicts became violent was, there was a small military education and training program that had been there for a number of years. We tried to focus that in a way that would give some Sri Lankan military personnel some training that would be relevant to how you deal with the civilian population in an insurgent situation that doesn't result in human rights abuses. So, in that sense, we were engaged very directly with the Sri Lankan military. The Sri Lankan government would have liked to have seen us much more directly involved with their military. We had to keep them at arm's length in terms of the extent to which we were going to get into this. So, certainly not from our perspective were we interfering. From the Sri Lankan perspective, call it what you will, interference or assistance, they would have liked to have had us much more extensively involved.

Q: Did military equipment or anything like that get involved?

TOMSETH: That was something that the government would have very much liked to have seen. They would have liked to have seen a fairly extensive U.S. involvement in equipping their police and military forces for a couple of reasons, not the least of which is that they thought that that would demonstrate to New Delhi that the government in Colombo had the U.S. on its side and therefore New Delhi ought to back off a bit in terms of the sub-rosa support that Tamil insurgents in Sri Lanka were obviously getting from southern Indiwith official Indian blessing or otherwise; it didn't really matter. That consideration was a reason on our part that we would prefer not to get too extensively involved, thank you. We were not really out looking for trouble in our relationship with the Indians. We are not going to let the Indians dictate what we do, but we weren't looking for trouble either.

Q: How about the role of the Indians? Did we get involved in that at this time?

TOMSETH: To a degree, not in Madras so much as in New Delhi and Washington. There were some discussions in which we suggested to the Indians that there probably was more that they could be doing in Tamil Nadu to check arms deliveries across the Pocs Straits to insurgent groups in Sri Lanka and probably more they could do in terms of not allowing their territory to be used for training of insurgents, which they were doing. They were turning a blind eye to it.

Q: What about the effect of this on the operation of the embassy? Were we concerned about bombings and that sort of thing?

TOMSETH: Increasingly so. We had a couple of incidents there that very directly affected U.S. personnel. In one case, an AID contractor who fairly recently arrived, his wife had come in to visit him.She was leaving, but was going to come back later with the rest of the family. He had taken her out to the airport to send her off in the evening. On the way back, there was a blackout in Colombo. By that time, there had been a number of bombings around Colombo, so there were a series of police and military checkpoints around the city. In the dark, he came upon one of these and didn't recognize what it was. The people at the barricade apparently told him to stop, but it may not have been in English. In any event, he didn't understand that he was being told to stop and he drove through the checkpoint, whereupon they opened fire on his car and he was fairly badly wounded, lost an eye. He lived, but was fairly badly wounded in that incident.

On another occasion, the regional customs officer who was based in Karachi had come down from Colombo and was going from there to the Maldives along with our commercial officer to conduct some textile negotiations. They had a flight from Colombo to Mali that was supposed to leave about mid morning, an Air Lanka flight. He had a business class ticket. Lorraine Takahashi, our commercial officer, had an economy ticket. But when they got to the airport, he asked the crew if it would be possible to move Lorraine up with him because they had some things to go over before they arrived in Mali for these negotiations. They had a seat, so they said, "Yes, she can come up here and sit beside you." While they were sitting on the tarmac, Air Lanka, as was often the case, was late in taking off, and a bomb in the back of the plane went off and blew back through the airport, killing about 20 people and injured quite a few more. But because the two of them were sitting up at the front of the plane, neither one of them were hurt. Had the plane taken off when it was supposed to have taken off, they would have all been dead. The bomb had a timing device on it and was set to go shortly after it was supposed to be in the air.

So, yes, during that period, we got much more security conscious than had been the case even just a couple of years prior.

Q: What about the military, the transit flights and all? Did these cause any problems?

TOMSETH: It caused a certain among of angst in New Delhi. But in the end, it worked out fairly well. I'm laughing because of the way we brought the first C 130 through the Colombo airport. There is an annual event in Sri Lanka called the Parahara Kandy, the old royal capital up in the hills of Sri Lanka. It's part of the Buddhist calendar. There is a big parade with elephants as the central piece of this celebration. At that time, the elephant that led this, a big tusker, was getting rather elderly. I think he was over 70 years at that point, which is about as long as elephants live. The question became, what were they going to do to replace old Raja when he went on to his reward? I don't know a great deal about elephants, but you can tell fairly early on whether they're going to have particularly long tusks after they're born. The Sri Lankans had gone through the inventory of all the young elephants that they had in captivity on the island and there was none that was going to grow the kind of tusks that they needed for a replacement for Raja, but they had identified through their Thai friends, another essentially Terrabada Buddhist country, that in Chiang Mai, they had a young elephant that was going to grow these long tusks. They were prepared to donate that elephant to Sri Lanka, but they had no way of getting the elephant there. So, my idea was, well, why don't we just see if the U.S. military can bring that elephant to Colombo on a plane and, by the way, that plane can then go on to Diego Garcia with other cargo. So, that is how we did it. That first C 130 flight brought in the elephant from Chiang Mai, landed at Colombo, offloaded the elephant, and then flew on to Diego Garcia.

Q: Did the Cold War intrude at all while you were there in Sri Lanka?

TOMSETH: No, not really. Well, I suppose the closest it ever came was the annual at that time UN General Assembly Resolution on the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace Proposal.

Q: What is that?

TOMSETH: Well, it has died. When I was up in New York two years ago, it had gone the way of the dinosaurs. I don't know what happened to it ultimately. The idea was that the Indian Ocean would be declared a zone of peace. Among the provisions that would be included in this would be a... They can't stop a country from sending a nuclear powered or nuclear armed warship through the Indian Ocean whether or not they have such a resolution, but part of it was that nuclear powered and nuclear equipped warships should not transit the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, so naturally, we were opposed. The Indians were the great proponents of this. They had Soviet support for this. I think the Soviets concluded that they didn't have to pay a great price for sticking their thumb in the American eye on this issue. The Sri Lankans actually supported this, even though it was essentially an Indian idea. The Sri Lankans actually proposed the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace, but not with the enthusiasm of the Indians. Annually, we were lobbying them to abstain at least on the vote in the General Assembly.

Q: Were there any other developments there in this 1984 1986 period?

TOMSETH: No. The main ones from the U.S. point of view were this Tamil insurgency and the government's response to it and then secondarily our strategic issues, particularly transit rights through the Indian Ocean. And we had an aid program and some economic interests in Sri Lanka.

Q: You left in 1986.

TOMSETH: I left in 1986. What had happened was, I think, as these bombings on Colombo became more frequent and against the background of what had happened in Iran, where my wife and children had to leave on very short notice, my wife became increasingly uncomfortable in Colombo. So, in the summer of 1985, she decided that she wanted to take the children and come back to Washington. She really didn't like being in that environment. I was committed to stay at least two years. I think I probably would have stayed three if my family had been there, but after they left, I was not prepared to entertain the idea of staying beyond the minimum that I was committed to, so I left in 1986.

Q: Where did you go then?

TOMSETH: I finally came back to Southeast Asia. What goes around comes around, I guess. I came back to Washington and became director of the Office for Thailand and Burmese Affairs.

Q: We'll pick that up in 1986 at that point.

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Today is August 11, 1999. Vic, you're back in... Was it the East Asian Bureau then?

TOMSETH: No. I think they changed the name from EA to EAP in t he early 1970s. The first time I served on the Thai desk from 1973 1975, it was already the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Bureau.

Q: So, you served there from 1986 to what?

TOMSETH: 1986 1989.

Q: You were what ?

TOMSETH: Director for Thailand and Burma.

Q: Why don't we do Burma first? What was the situation with Burma and what were our concerns when you arrived?

TOMSETH: Actually, with Burma in 1986 when I came back, the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Burma was considerably changed from what it had been when I was in that office in the mid 1970s. At that earlier time, it was sort of 10 years or so after Ney Win, a Burmese military strongman who had overthrown the elected government in 1962, was at the peak of what they called "the Burmese way to socialism." What Ney Win and his government had done after 1962 was to literally cut Burma off from the rest of the world. I remember going through Rangoon in 1964 as a brand new Peace Corps volunteer en route to Nepal. At that time, you could go to Burma on an international flight, but you had to leave on the next available flight. There weren't so many international flights that it was possible to stay maybe 24 hours before the next flight came along, but no more than that. By 1986, when I came back from Sri Lanka to Washington and that office, things had opened up quite a bit. Particularly in terms of the U.S. Burmese relationship, it was actually a fairly cooperative one. We had a USAID program in there. The Drug Enforcement Administration was very active. We were providing a substantial among of aid to Burma for counternarcotics efforts. In the counternarcotics area, the Burmese were actually doing some things that Washington wished some of our other partners like Mexico, Thailand, and Colombia would do and that is spraying the opium crop in northern Burma. That was not without some controversy. As you might imagine, there were environmentalists and people worried about indigenous people, who were very much against the spraying program, whether you were talking about Latin America, Southeast Asia, or Southwest Asia. But from the point of view of the counternarcotics community in Washington, the view was that that was great. We wished that others would do what the Burmese were doing. That was 1986. Within two years, all of that had changed, largely because of something that came about very unexpectedly. That was a genuinely grassroots pro democracy movement in Burma just at a time when Ney Win, who was then well into his 70s and had a history of heart trouble, decided to step back, that he actually resigned from his official positions in the regime, although many people thought that he still continued to exercise a great deal of indirect influence on what was happening. But in the spring and summer of 1988, this grassroots pro democracy movement got underway, only to be literally cut down by the military in September of 1988. at that point, we and a number of other western donors and the UN to a substantial degree cut back very drastically on our assistance programs. Over the next year or so, the political relationship with Burma also soured very considerably as the military first agreed to have a national election, but then when that was won overwhelmingly by the opposition (under the leadership of one of Burma's founding fathers, Aung San, his daughter was in the forefront of this), the military did not follow through on its commitment to allow the winner of the elections to form a government and draft a new constitution. That really has been the history of U.S. Burmese relations and indeed Burmese relations with virtually all of the West since the beginning of t his decade. But at the time I arrived in the late summer of 1986, the bilateral relationship with Burma was actually pretty good and by historical standards much more extensive than it had been in decades, but that all changed during the three years that I was on the desk.

Q: What was the reason? You have this reclusive military government. What was in it for them to cooperate and spray and do things like that?

TOMSETH: When I was on the desk the first time, in the mid 1970s, my colleague who handled Burmese affairs, who had served in Rangoon before he came back to Washington, told me about a discussion that he had with one of his Soviet colleagues in Rangoon while he was in Burma. This Soviet told him that the Burmese were giving a bad name to socialism. That, in effect, summarized what happened during those two and a half decades that Ney Win was in charge, during which Burma pursued this very reclusive, isolationist policy. At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Burma was then a crown colony of Britain, but if you think of colonial Southeast Asia in post World War II national terms, of the areas that gained independence at the end of World War II, Burma was by far the most developed and richest of the countries in Southeast Asia. Under the British, a very good transportation system had been developed. Burma was by far the world's leading exporter of rice. It was an exporter of petroleum. It was a big exporter of tropical hardwood, particularly teak. While there was a fair amount of damage during World War II (I think Burma suffered more physical damage than any of the other Southeast Asian countries.), it still had a very good infrastructure at independence in 1948. First under civilian governments and then for 25 years or so under Ney Win, Burmese governments took Burma from being the most developed, richest country in Southeast Asia to being among the most backward. If you go to Laos, it sort of has an excuse for being as poor as it is. It's a very poor environment, but that is not the case in Burma. It was really bad government that led them to where they were. By the 1980s, Burma, which had once been the world's largest exporter of rice, was actually importing rice to feed its own population. At that point, the Burmese military, I think, realized that they had to change this Burmese road to socialism policy at least a bit in order to turn the economy around. That really provided the opening for the United States to begin developing a relationship with Burma that was very much centered on counternarcotics issues. Burma had gone from being the largest exporter of rice to being the largest exporter of opiates.

Q: In the 1986 period, how far did the writ of the central government run in Burma?

TOMSETH: Almost from the time of independence, there had been at the periphery of Burma ethnic groups that wanted something other than the union of Burma that had been established at independence in 1948. That ranged from some groups that were seeking total independence from Burma to groups that wanted a large degree of autonomy within the Burmese union. In the midst of all that, there were a couple of communist groups that also were running insurgencies in Burma. In the early years, there was some question whether the government in Rangoon actually was going to survive these things, but by the 1960s when I first arrived in Southeast Asia, while these insurgent groups had considerable writ, particularly in non Burmese areas, in the areas where ethnic minorities were a majority, there wasn't much doubt that the central government was in control of the territory of Burma in a general sense. Yes, there might be areas where they would have to mount a military campaign to go, but there was virtually no area in Burma where they couldn't go if they set their mind to it. But these ethnic insurgencies, these communist factionand I should add that there was also a nationalist Chinese faction that arrived on the scene after 1949 in northern Burma and at first continued to carry on an insurgency into Hunan Province in China, but very quickly got caught up in the narcotics businesthey too had their little fiefdom in northern Burma. But by the 1960s, certainly, there was no doubt that the government in Rangoon was going to stand and ultimately might even be able to prevail over these insurgencies. But it continued on for a very long time and still does today to a degree, although the current regime has cut a series of deals with various of these groups over the last six years or so. So, there isn't a whole lot of fighting that goes on anymore.

Q: Was Burma in our consideration essentially a fiefdom that was run for the benefit of the army, or were they really generally committed to trying to redo the whole society?

TOMSETH: The leading group in the independence movement that began initially in the 1920s and was a bit stronger in the 1930s, but really got an impetus with the outbreak of World War II, was dominated by the military from the very beginning. The group that formed the first government, led by Aung San, who made his name during World War II in a military force that the Japanese put together when they occupied Burma and then that group towards the end of the war turned on the Japanese... So, the military was there from the very beginning. They saw themselves as a core institution in the independence movement. I think at the outset, a lot of these people in the military were genuinely patriotic. They weren't in this purely for the sake of power itself or for the material rewards that flow from it. But over time, that certainly happened. What you have today is a military regime that runs the country for the military and particularly the senior leadership within the military and doesn't care a whole lot about the rest of the population.

Q: During this time, who was or were our ambassadors and how did the embassy operate?

TOMSETH: When I got back to Washington in 1986, Dan O'Donohue was ambassador in Burma. He was within a few months finishing up his tour there. Dan had been a leading force in the development of this relationship with Burma in the 1980s, first as deputy assistant secretary for Southeast Asia in the East Asia and Pacific Bureau and then as ambassador in Burma. I don't know whether you know Dan or not, but

Q: I've had a long set of interviews with him.

TOMSETH: He really is an amazing person in terms of his energy and intellectual capacity. I think without his involvement first as deputy assistant secretary and then as ambassador in Rangoon, this relationship with the regime in Rangoon just wouldn't have grown to the extent that it did during the course of the early 1980s.

Q: When he left, who took over?

TOMSETH: When he left, Burt Levin, who also was a longtime East Asia hand, but basically a China person, took his place. Initially, Burt was very much inclined to continue this policy of trying to develop the bilateral relationship with counternarcotics cooperation being the core of that relationship, but it was on his watch that this pro democracy movement began in Burma. In very short order, he and the embassy got very much caught up in that. It was something that was easy to support. There were a lot of students involved in this. Very quickly, Aung San's daughter, Su Chi, emerged as a leading figure in the pro democracy movement. She is a very attractive woman from a variety of points of view. Physically, she is a handsome enough person, but she was educated in England, is married to an Englishman, is very articulate... What she was saying about where Burma ought to be trying to go was very resonant in a lot of quarters in the United States and elsewhere in the West. It was an easy enough thing for the embassy, for Burt Levin, to get caught up in this. I think the people in Washington got caught up in this as well.

But when the military cracked down on the pro democracy movement in September of 1988, the trauma that the embassy staff experienced was very profound. I like to compare it to what happened in Teheran in February of 1979 when the embassy was attacked by several armed groups with some casualties. That was a very searing experience for people in the embassy. For people in the embassy in Rangoon, while the embassy wasn't attacked, it sits on a stree(end of tape)

Q: You were saying a lot of the action...

TOMSETH: Yes. In September of 1988 when the military moved to suppress this movement, a lot of the action took place on the street and in that square right in front of the embassy. The staff witnessed people literally being beheaded in front of the embassy. So, again, it was a very searing experience for people there. After that, the embassy and the staff... We moved a lot of the staff out to Bangkok at that point, but then eventually returned them. I always thought that was a bit of a mistake, that what we probably should have done is what was decided in 1979 in the case of the embassy in Teheran, which was replace most of the staff so that you didn't have people trying to deal with this post military intervention situation who had been so scarred by the experience of it, but we didn't. The result of that was that in the aftermath of the suppression of the democracy movement, the embassand Burt Levin particularlwere wholeheartedly committed to these democratic forces and were unwilling to try to engage the military in brokering a process that would lead to a civilian government. I don't know that that would have happened if you had had God himself on the scene. But I think our policy was handicapped to a degree by the view that Burt and his staff had of the situation in Burma, a view that was very much conditioned by this really terrible experience that they had gone through in September 1988.

Q: As a practical measure, if an embassy is sitting there saying, "You're so brutal we're not going to talk to you," it has no function almost.

TOMSETH: It wasn't that they wouldn't talk to them at all, but the quality of the dialogue certainly suffered by virtue of the post military suppression of the democracy movement attitude that the embassy brought to the table in the discussion with the military. I have to say that the military certainly didn't do anything to make the embassy staff or people in Washington think that there might be some hope of bringing these people along. One of the things they did, even before the elections in 1990 that they had committed to shortly thereafter their intervention, was to put Aung San Su Chi, who was very much the leading symbol of this movement, undehouse arrest.

Q: Where she is today.

TOMSETH: Well, they released her from house arrest a couple of summers ago. While she isn't totally free to move about, she is able to move out of her house a bit. Indeed, the regime would like her to leave the country. Her husband recently died. He had prostate cancer. On his deathbed in England, he appealed to the regime to give him a visa to go see her one last time before he died. The regime said that they would let her go to England; she could go to England if she wanted to; it was too difficult a trip for him to make. But she was not prepared to leave because she knew very well that the regime wouldn't let her back into the country if she did depart.

Q: When this thing broke out, Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State?

TOMSETH: No. This was the Reagan administration, the tail end of it. George Schulz was Secretary of State.

Q: I would assume that there was no Cold War strategic or other interests there so that there was concern, but we weren't going to do anything.

TOMSETH: Yes. The issues of the 1950s and 1960s had really gone away. Burma was not seen as a strategic point on the Chinese periphery by the late 1980s. No, there was no inclination to try and get involved in this other than to bring pressure to bear on the regime by cutting off aid.

Q: Were you getting information... How did Thailand play from our point of view? I know we have post interests up around the Burmese border, mainly for drug purposes. Were you getting good information?

TOMSETH: I think you have to make a distinction between what we have done for decades from Thailand in terms of looking into Burma. That activity tends to be centered in Chiang Mai. Originally, it was very much key to the communist victory in China and the KMT (Kuomintang) remnant in northeastern Burma. Then over time, this shifted to a narcotics focus. Chiang Mai was a convenient place to do that. Certainly during the 1960s and 1970s, it was virtually impossible to get any kind of information on what was going on in northern Burma via Rangoon. The writ of the central government was occasional and we didn't have any kind of cooperative relationship with the central government in those days. So, what was done out of Chiang Mai was very critical to having a picture of what was going on in northeastern Burma.

The democracy movement in Burma that began in 1988 was very much a Rangoon centered phenomenon. So, it was the embassy reporting in Rangoon that the Department, that Washington, relied upon to get a picture of what was happening in terms of the democracy movement, not what people based in Chiang Mai were reporting, which was very heavily focused on ethnic insurgencies and counternarcotics out of Chiang Mai.

Q: What was the Burmese situation vis a vis China during this period? It's got a long border with China.

TOMSETH: In the late 1980s, I guess I would characterize their relationship with China as "correct." It wasn't a particularly good relationship. It was not bad, but it wasn't very extensive. Now, that has changed a lot in the intervening decade. There is a lot of commerce, both licit and illicit, that goes across that northern border. In addition to that, when the U.S. and European countries generally cut off aid, they also cut off any kind of arms dealing with Burma. A lot of that had been purely commercial even before 1988. There weren't any significant military assistance programs. But when that happened, the Burmese military had to find new sources of supply. China emerged as one of the most important in that respect. So, these days, the relationship between China and Burma is probably much more extensive and certainly more cooperative than it was a decade ago when it was really a fairly limited relationship. There was a certain amount of black market or grey market commerce across that northern border, but that was very much a local phenomenon. These days, it's much more with the blessing of the two capitals, of Rangoon and Beijing.

Q: What about relations with India at that time?

TOMSETH: Burma's relations with India have never been terribly good. One of the things Ney Win did when he came into power in 1962 was expel a lot of people who were "foreigners." Many of these people actually had been born in Burma, but they were the descendants of people that had come to Burma during the British period. That included large numbers of Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalis, and even Chinese. But the ethnic Chinese population in Burma, first of all, wasn't nearly as big as the South Asian population, but they had been able to assimilate more into Burmese society to a greater degree than the Indian population for some obvious reasonracial, but also cultural. The South Asians were Hindus or Muslims and that sort of automatically distinguished them from Terrabada Burmese. For the Chinese, whether they were Confucian, Buddhist, or some mixture thereof, integrating themselves into that Terrabada Buddhist society was a much easier proposition than it was for the Indians. But when that expulsion of foreigners occurred in the early 1960s, that really soured Burmese Indian relations for a long time. So, when the military suppressed this democracy movement in 1988, among Asian countries, India was one of the very few that didn't really align itself with the United States and Western Europe, but its reaction to what happened in Burma was much closer to the western reaction than the reaction in most of the rest of Southeast and East Asia, which tended to be "Well, we might not like this, but there is not a whole lot we can do about it. Burma is part of our neighborhood, so we're going to have to figure out some way to get along with them." But in New Delhi, they flirted with the idea of giving some support to exile Burmese student groups and being generally supportive of the pro democracy movement, which didn't endear them to the military regime, obviously.

Q: With India and Burma, Burma abuts onto a restive part of the Indian ethnic groups. At that time, was there any problem of local insurgencies spilling over between Burma and India either way?

TOMSETH: What happened in Burma I don't think made any difference at all in terms of what was going on in northeastern India at that time and still goes on. To some degree, there is not a very clear ethnic line along that border between India and Burma. In the area, there have been over the years a variety of local insurgent groups, but while they still exist, they don't really pose a serious threat to Indian control of that area. What happened in Burma in 1988 and thereafter didn't really affect to any significant degree what was going on in northeastern India.

It may have actually had a bigger impact in terms of what was happening across the Burmese Bangladesh border. There had been for some time a trickling of Bangladeshis into Burma across that border, mainly because of population pressure. That may have actually been given a bit of a filip by preoccupation of the military in Rangoon with the pro democracy movement and the aftermath of its suppression, but when the military regime got its act together, it went back to doing what the military government before the rise of a democracy movement had donand that is periodically push these Bangladeshis back into Bangladesh.

Q: What about the Burmese embassy here in Washington? Did they do anything or were they just sort of a passive...

TOMSETH: The Burmese ambassador at the time was a military man, as their ambassadors here had been, I think almost without exception, since the 1960s. He sort of struggled to cope with what was happening in Burma, first of all to try and keep up with what was going on in Burma. We often had better information than he did, simply because of the poverty of the Burmese communication system. Then after the military intervention, he tried in a rather feckless and ineffectual way to do what our embassy seemed very reluctant to do and that was to try and figure out where are the potential bases for some kind of dialogue between the U.S. government and the military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) that might facilitate keeping the bilateral relationship on track. I liked the guy. He was a nice guy. But he was very ineffectual and his efforts just had no impact in terms of what was happening in our embassy in Rangoon and within the U.S. policy context here in Washington.

Q: Was there any Burmese student group in the United States? Was there any movement around here or any Burmese opposition group centered in the United States?

TOMSETH: Well, there is a very small Burmese community in the United States, but you have to look at what happened, particularly after 1962. Very few Burmese went abroad for education. As the economy steadily went downhill, even in the 1980s when things began to loosen up a bit and in theory it might be possible for Burmese to begin going abroad for education, they didn't have the monetary resources to do it. So, unlike other situations, there was no significant Burmese student group in the United States when this happened. What you had were a few people who dated from a different generation of Burmese immigrants, people who had come as students or for whatever reasons in the 1950s, and a few who had some kind of international organization connection. One that had a granddaughter who was married to a Burmese whose father was at one of the UN organizations. They were around on the circuit here in Washington and New York. There were a couple of Americans who were married to Burmese, including a congressional staffer who was on Patrick Moynihan's staff. They were very much involved in it. But their numbers were quite small.

This pro democracy movement had a very important student component of it in Burma. The post suppression phenomenon that is more interesting from a student point of view is what happened in Thailand, not here. A lot of these students fled to the Thai border. The student community in Thailand, which typically is more liberal than whatever government is in place in Thailand at any given moment, very much identified with this. In fairly short order, some of these Burmese students who wound up on the border found themselves in Bangkok and in cooperation with their Thai student colleagues, there were demonstrations organized outside the Burmese embassy in Bangkok. The Bangkok media, particularly the print media, tended to be very sympathetic to these students and the pro democracy movement. So, in Thailand, you have to this day a media community, particulary in the print media, who are very vociferous in telling their audience how retched this Burmese military regime in Rangoon is. At the same time, there is the Thai governmenand this has been true of a succession of governments over the last decade, who don't really like the military regime very much, but who look at it in very real politik terms. "This is an important country that has a very long border with Thailand. One way or another, we're going to have to deal with it." So, you get this situation in Thailand, where Burmese students are active in cooperation with Thai students with a lot of sympathy in the print media particularly, and that stands in contrast to the much more pragmatic "hold your nose and deal with these guys" approach that Thai governments take.

Q: Turning to Thailand now, 1986 1989, when you arrived as director, what were our relations with Thailand?

TOMSETH: I think by way of preface, I have to say that in my earlier incarnation in Thai affairs in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a bilateral relationship that was overwhelmingly dominated by mutual security concerns. Very little else counted for much. By the mid 1980s when I came back, there was an important mutual security dimension, particularly with regard to the situation in Cambodia, but economics had come much more to the fore. During the three years that I was on the desk, from 1986 1989, and then when I went off to be DCM in Bangkok for another three years, economic issues often took up as much, if not more, time than these mutual security issues that were hangover from an earlier era.

Q: I have been interviewing Bill Brown, who was ambassador during this time. I think he was there from 1985 1988. He was saying things were moving along nicely until one day he was awakened by rice. Can you talk about rice?

TOMSETH: Yes. It was a Farm Act. At that time, Congress on a five year cycle renewed the Farm Act. It was the vehicle for all of the various programs to support one farm constituency or another, everything from dairy supports to the sugar quota program and rice. Thailand by the 1980s, even well before that actually, had supplanted Burma as the world's leading exporter of rice. In the 1950s and 1960s, even into the 1970s, it was the largest single export commodity. Thailand earned more from rice exports than any other kind of export. By the 1980s, that was no longer true. Manufacturers accounted for a much larger proportion of export earnings than rice did, but you have to understand the Thai economy. Even in the 1980s, 65% of the population were in rural areas and overwhelmingly, those people were engaged in rice farming. So, from the point of view of a very large portion of the Thai population, rice exports were important, even though looking at the total economy, they were of diminishing importance.

During this same period, the United States had become the world's second leading rice exporter. One thing I didn't really understand about agricultural politics in the United States until I came back to the situation is that commodities that are grown in only a few states often can exert greater leverage than commodities that are grown in a large number of states. Rice is basically a commodity of four states: California, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. In late 1985 when the Farm Act was up for renewal, literally in the dead of night, the congressional delegations from these four states cut a deal with their congressional colleagues that provided very substantial subsidies for American rice exports. The consequence of that and the great fear that the Thais had was that in a tight world rice market (tight in the sense that at that particular juncture, the supply actually was a bit in excess of demand), that these subsidies for U.S. rice were going to crowd out Thai exports, particularly in traditional Thai markets. So, the Thai were absolutely up in arms over this program of subsidies for U.S. rice exports. Their sense of grievance, I think, was heightened by the fact that on other trade issues, we were regularly beating them over the head about their subsidy regime, whether that was in terms of barriers to agricultural imports into Thailand or they had a few minor subsidies for some of their major export crops, including rice, although by the mid 1980s, they had eliminated virtually all of the export subsidies for rice. They had some for sugar and a couple of other things. So, that became overnight a very contentious and central issue in U.S. Thai relations, this system of subsidies for U.S. rice that were provided for in the 1985 Farm Act.

Q: Did you find it worthwhile or not to sort of explain to Congress what they were doing and to be understanding of this important relationship? I'm saying this while trying to keep a straight face. I have been down this road before.

TOMSETH: The view in the Department in the East Asia Bureau, certainly on the desk, was like Dizzy Dean used to say, "There were two chances of getting the Congress to do something about this: slim and none." Basically, our tactics for dealing with this in a bilateral context became to try to get the Thais to focus on the international market rather than the U.S. system of subsidies. Our arguments were "Don't worry about this. There's plenty of room for both of us in this international market." There might have been and there might not have been. It really depended upon worldwide weather more than anything else. In the international rice market, you have to watch what happens in certain large rice consuming areas (China, Indonesia, even in South Asia, although by the 1980s, South Asia was less and less a rice deficit area and actually in the case of Pakistan moving to rice exports). Basically, what we wound up doing was not praying for rain, but praying that there wouldn't be rain, at least in Indonesia, China, and the Philippines, and a few places like that. As it turned out, during that period, the international rice market was fairly good, so the great worry that the Thais had never reallmaterialized during that three year period.

Q: During your watch.

TOMSETH: During my watch.

Q: Which is all one cares about.

TOMSETH: Well, as it turned out, my watch shifted from Washington to Bangkok. By the time I got to Bangkok, or at least shortly thereafter, a new threat had begun to materialize. That was not the U.S. U.S. and Thai rice were competing for the upper end of the market, high quality rice. In that market, as it turned out, there was plenty of demand for both Thai and U.S. rice. But at the low end of the market, Vietnam, which once had been a major rice exporter

Q: This was one of our big deals during the Vietnam War, to develop the Mekong Valley, saying, "You can be the major rice producer."

TOMSETH: During the 1970s and 1980s, socialism in Vietnam did for rice production what socialism in Burma had done for rice production. Year in and year out, Vietnam was a significant deficit area. They couldn't begin to produce enough rice to feed themselves. But beginning in about 1988 or 1989, the government in Hanoi began to loosen some of the restrictions on farmers. Almost within one growing season, Vietnam went from a situation in which in some provinces in northern Vietnam, there was really worry of famine to a situation in southern Vietnam where, once again, this Mekong Delta area was producing a substantial surplus of rice for export. The quality of milling in South Vietnam was very poor, so what they were turning out for export was at the low end. It was basically for African markets or other poor Asian markets, but Thailand was exporting that kind of rice, too. So, by the end of the decade, they were much more focused on Vietnam than they were the United States for this low end of the market. Their great worry was that Vietnam was going to improve the quality of its milling and that it would move into the upper end of the market as well and become a really serious competitor for Thai rice in a way that U.S. rice could begin to be.

Q: What about the difference between the American style rice and the sticky rice? In Korea and Japan, they prefer a stickier type rice. Was that a factor?

TOMSETH: To a degree. In the U.S. in the lower Mississippi Basin, in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, they grew long grain rice, which is the main type of rice they grow in Thailand. In California, they grow Japonica, which is a short grain glutinous rice. Thailand had and still does export some rice to Japan and Korea, but not much and it never had because it didn't produce the right kind of rice. So, in that market, we really weren't competitors. Most of the California rice that was exportemuch more went to Korea than to Japan. Japatalk about a subsidy! They really had a subsidy. So that wasn't a real big issue in this U.S. Thai rice dispute. It was really over long grain rice.

Q: How about tobacco? You were talking about economic...

TOMSETH: The tobacco did become a bilateral issue. Thailand itself grows tobacco and at one point actually exported a bit. But by the 1980s, it actually was a significant importer of U.S. tobacco, which it would then blend with Thai grown tobacco to manufacture cigarettes. But the issue in the bilateral relationship became the importation of U.S. cigarettes into the Thai market. There, Thailand did have a tariff regime that kept out foreign brands. It made them very expensive. You could get foreign brands in Thailand, but they were much more expensive than domestic brands. So, the push on the U.S. side was for a lowering of the tariff barriers as part of the GATT round that during much of this period was being negotiated. I forget when we actually concluded that. I think it was before I left the desk. But in our bilateral trade negotiations, we were constantly beating them over the head to lower tariff barriers on specific products. Tobacco became one of them. It was sort of an interesting one. A lot of people in the embassy, myself includel am not a smoker and I have some reservations about it.

Q: The damn stuff kills you!

TOMSETH: That's exactly right. But I was drawing my paycheck from the U.S. government and this was not the sort of issue that I was prepared to resign from the Foreign Service over.

Ultimately, we succeeded in getting the Thais to lower the tariff barrier so that U.S. cigarettes could enter the Thai market. One of the ironies of that issue, however, was that the negotiations on tariffs became very public. It actually helped stimulate an anti smoking movement in Thailand. There had always been a nascent one there, but they never really had gotten very far in terms of restrictions on Thai tobacco products. But as a result of these tariff negotiations to allow U.S. cigarettes into the market, the anti smoking movement in Thailand gained significant strength and the net result is that while U.S. tobacco products got into the Thai market, the Thai market is no longer as friendly to tobacco products of any kind as it was 10 12 years ago.

Q: In dealing with Thailand and economic issues, you really were talking about dealing with a government where the members of the government had to be concerned about the constituents. It might have been sort of military involvement in the government, but still they had constituents?

TOMSETH: Yes. The military hasn't gone completely away in Thailand, but I've nol guess I'm still involved in it to a degree, although I'm no longer in the Foreign Servicbut my involvement with Thailand now goes back almost 35 years. In that period of time, there had been some steps back. The most recent one was in 1991 when the military did overthrow an elected government, attempted to manipulate the constitutional process in the time honored way that the Thai military manipulated the constitutional process since 1932. But when you look at that entire period, there had been a lot of steps forward, too. It often is one step back, two steps forward. By the mid 1980s, the system of government in Thailand was much more democratic than it had been when I first saw it in the mid 1960s. Today, a decade or so later, it is more democratic than it was even in the 1980s. But during that period, when I was on the desk and then subsequently as deputy chief of mission in Thailand, yes, you had a government in which there were senior figures in the government who had military backgrounds, including two prime ministers while I was on the desk, Prem Tunseyoonon and then Chai Chai Chunawon, who succeeded him. Both had been generals at one point in their lives, but at the time they were prime minister were no longer in the military. In Chai Chai's case, it had been nearly 30 years since he had been in the military. But they did have elections regularly. In fact, they had them about every two years because the governments that came out of these elections invariably were coalition governments. It seemed like in Thailand, it was simply impossible to hold a coalition together longer than about two years. The members of parliament did have to be responsive to their constituents. It was not like when my father in law was elected to the first parliament in 1933 and he went off to Bangkok. He was actually born in Korat in northeastern Thailand, but had gone to Bangkok as a very small child and went to school and only as an adult after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy went back to be elected as a representativ(end of tape)

He didn't get elected, but typically in the 1930s and 1940s, members of parliament didn't have to pay very much attention to their constituencies, but by the 1980s, that had really changed. Parliamentarians by and large were sensitive to their constituencies. Again, that is even more the case today. So, this was a parliamentary system in which what went on in parliament actually counted in terms of national policy.

Q: How effective was it and how did the Thai embassy work during this time? Thailand had been around for a long time. We had a close relationship.

TOMSETH: During the period that I was on the desk, from 1986 1989, we actually had three Thai ambassadors. The fellow who was there when I arrived departed within just a few months. He had been there five years. He was a very senior Thai diplomat, had been permanent secretary in the ministry before coming to Washington and went back to that position after he left. That is the senior career position in the Thai ministry, the equivalent of under secretary for Political Affairs in the State Department. He was succeeded by a younger career diplomat who had succeeded him as permanent secretary when this fellow came to Washington, a guy named Asas Arsin, who was from a very prominent family in Thailand actually of Chinese background. Asas' grandfather was the first Thai to receive a university degree from the United States in the late 19th century. His father, Puts Arsin, who is still alive (He's in his 90s now.) was ambassador here in the 1950s and then very briefly prime minister in 1957 just as a placeholder in one of these periodic military shuffles. Then thereafter, he had several ministerial positions dealing with economic matters.

When I came through Bangkok in late July/August of 1986, I went to see Asas, who was then still permanent secretary. He told me that he was replacing Kasim Kasimsi, who was ambassador in Washington at that point. He wanted to know if I had any advice for him as ambassador. I had worked on the desk in the 1970s and they had a very good ambassador at that time, Anyon Panarachun. But the thing that I hadn't noticed over the yearand particularly for the Thai embassis that because relations with the embassy and the U.S. military had always been so close, when people came to Washington, they tended to look at the State Department and the Defense Department as their friends, their primary points of contact. I said, "That is very true. You will be able to count on the desk as being a support in Washington and the same thing with people over at DOD, but where you really need to make your mark is with the Congress." I don't think because I told Asas thaBill Brown told him the same thing and I suppose any number of people who passed through his office before he came to Washington had a similar messagbut when Asas came to town, unlike any Thai ambassador I had ever known, he spent a great deal of time trying to work the Hill. There has been no Thai ambassador since who has done it as effectively as Asan did during the period that he was ambassador here. So, most of the time that I was on the desk, Asas Arsin was the ambassador and he was a very effective Thai ambassador.

Q: This was one of the problems, that many ambassadors don't really understand how little clout the Department of State has.

How did you find as area director your relationship was with the Department of Defense? Obviously, our defense relationship is a major one.

TOMSETH: When I had been on the desk in the mid 1970s, that relationshil guess you would say it was more intense in that period and it also required tending all the time to make sure that personalities weren't getting cross wise and that the right hand knew what the left hand was doing. By the time I came back in 1986, relations betweeand it was basically a relationship between EAP and State and ISA (International Security Affairs), and Defense. Occasionally, we would get along with the assistance people over at Defense. But it was basically an EAP ISA relationship. It had long since become routinized and things worked very well. Now, I think it helped very much that the assistant secretary in ISA at that time was a great guy, Rich Armitage, who should have wound up being assistant secretary in EAP in the Bush administration but for Jesse Helms. He and Gaston Sigur, who was assistant secretary in EAP most of the time I was there, had a very good personal relationship and it was true on down the line between the deputy assistant secretary and people on the desk who dealt with Thai issues. So, in the three years that I was there, I never worried about the bureaucratic relationship in a way that I know my directors when I was a desk officer in the 1970s worried about it during that period.

Q: Bill Brown was saying that he could really get things done by calling the Department of Defense directly. Apparently, that whole group was close to each other and it was probably about the best team we've had.

TOMSETH: I'm in no position to judge the current crew. But during that period, in the late 1980s, both in State and Defense, you had a group of people that really worked very well together. There is no doubt about that.

Q: Thailand is both important strategically, but also an attraction for a variety of reasons, for tourism. It is a nice place to gpretty people, nice scenery, and all that. Sort of like Paris. It's a place that attracts congressional delegations.

TOMSETH: Yes, it does. It never had as many as Israel.

Q: Oh, no. That's political.

Did the care and feeding and preparation for congressional delegations and other people going there use up a bit of your time?

TOMSETH: Well, a fair amount, although I think in that earlier period, both when I was in the embassy and in the late 1960through 1971 and then on the desk from 1973 1975, the number of congressional delegations was even greater because the Vietnam War was going on, but we had a lot. Particularly during that period, you'd get a lot for a couple of different thingrefugee issues and missing in action (MIA)/prisoner of war (POW) issues. You got a lot of nostalgic congressional trips, people who had been in the Service during the Vietnam War, some of whom had been POWs themselves and were interested in the MIA/POW issue would come out to see how that was going on and often go to Vietnam, sometimes to Laos.

I wouldn't say that these were by and large a great deal of trouble. There were briefings that you would have to do and they would want papers and things, but this had really been refined to a science by this point. In Bangkok, because it was such a large diplomatic mission, they really had the staff to do these things. You had a group of people that could do them in their sleep. In Washington, we weren't so many. We were five officers on the desk. Again, thanks to word processing technology, recycling these briefing papers was not nearly the work that it had been when I was on the desk in the 1970s and everything had to be manually typed. So, while there were a lot of them, they weren't an onerous burden.

There were some that you sort of had to hold you nose because they had very little to do with serious business. They were basically shopping trips. But you hold your nose and do it.

Q: Yes. What about the continuing problems, particularly in Cambodia, with Thailand? How did you deal with that? To some extent, Laos, too.

TOMSETH: The entire three years that I was on the desk and then also the three years that I was DCM in Thailand, the major mutual securitissue that we had in Thailand was Cambodia. Trying to ensure that the resistance to the regime that the Vietnamese had installed when they invaded in late 1978 and occupied the country in early 1979 continued to be viable and particularly that the non communist portion of this, of which there were two major factions, had a degree of credibility within the overall resistance movement vis a vis the Khmer Rouge, which were the other part of the resistance and within that context, trying to find some mechanism for a negotiated settlement. In 1986, the Vietnamese were still fully present in Cambodia. It was during that three year perioactually, they did not withdraw the last of their troops until a few months after I got to Bangkok in September of 1989. So, the military dimension of it during those three years was particularly important, keeping the pressure on the Vietnamese. That included on our side a modest assistance program to these two non communist factions. We did not provide any so called "lethal aid," no weapons, to these factions, but there was a lot of training and a lot of non lethal material aid as well that had to be funneled through Thailand. There was also a group of countries that worked together in running this that included the U.S. and several of the associations for Southeast Asian nation countries, some of whom were providing lethal equipment to the non communist factions.

Q: Somebody had to do this.

TOMSETH: Somebody had to do it. Then there were the Chinese, who were the main supplier, virtually the only supplier, of material assistance to the Khmer Rouge. But they also supplied arms and ammunition to the two non communist. This all had to be coordinated. The Thais were sort of the central mechanism for the coordination of this assistance from whatever corridor and to whatever faction to the Cambodian resistance.

Q: Going back to Bill Brown, he was saying that though we weren't happy about it, it was the Khmer Rouge who were really doing most of the fighting. We were trying to get the other groups into the act, but there wasn't much substance there. Was that your observance?

TOMSETH: Throughout, right up until a peace agreement was finally hammered out in late 1991/early 1992, the Khmer Rouge were the overwhelming factor in putting military pressure first on the Vietnamese occupation forces and then on the Phnom Penh regime military forces after the Vietnamese withdrew. The whole thrust of our effort and our ASEAN colleagues' effort was to try and make these two non communist factions at least credible. That ended up in a push in the 1990 1991 dry season in which these two non communist factions were able to seize a little bit of territory in northwestern Cambodia and then hold onto it while we went through a series of negotiations in Jakarta, Thailand, and Paris that ultimately reached an accord that everybody signed onto.

Q: While you were dealing with all these problems, did China play much of a role in Thailand? They don't have a common border, but it's still the great presence there.

TOMSETH: If you go back to 1975, there is an interesting progression. In 1975, we had the collapse of the regimes in Saigon and Phnom Penh. The government, then an elected government, in Thailand scrambled like mad to make the best of this situation, a situation in which it looked like the U.S. was hightailing it for home and was not going to have anything to do with Southeast Asia again, Thailand making the best deal it could with both Hanoi and Beijing. Thailand broke off relations with the Republic of China government in Taiwan and established relations with Beijing. But even then, the Chinese continued to support a domestic insurgency in China, as did Hanoi. But then the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and that didn't make the Chinese very happy. They needed the help of the Thais to support the Khmer Rouge, which had retreated to the northern and western borders of Cambodia along Thailand. The price the Thais extracted from the Chinese (and they were happy enough to pay that price. They didn't have any great investment in this domestic insurgency in Thailand.) was that the Chinese would cut off support to the insurgency. So, China then became an arms supplier for the Khmer Rouge via Thailand and cut off their support for the domestic communist insurgency in Thailand. In the early 1980s with this Vietnamese occupation presence in Cambodia and periodically chasing the Khmer Rouge and the non communists, too, across the border into Thailand, making forays into Thailand. The Chinese added Thailand to countries that they were providing military support to. They began to provide Thailand some military equipment at friendship prices during the early 1980s, largely in response to what the Vietnamese were doing in Cambodia across the Chinese border. So, by the latter half of the decade when I showed up, China wasn't as important a security partner as the United States. I should add that in the 1980s, with the situation in Cambodia, the United States began being a significant supplier of military equipment to Thailand once again and did some special things like prepositioning stocks in Thailand that Thailand could also draw upon if there were an emergency that made it necessary to do so and we couldn't get equipment to Thailand in time to respond to that emergency. But by the second half of the 1980s, China had actually become an important security partner for Thailand, as was the United States, not to that degree, but certainly significant.

Q: By this time, the Thais' concern about the United States bolting and running from Southeast Asia had been taken care of?

TOMSETH: It was a different era. I don't think the Thais had any illusions about the United States once again introducing forces into Southeast Asia to deal with a local conflict, but certainly confidence in the United States as a security partner had been substantially rehabilitated by virtue of the response that we had made to this situation in Cambodia.

Q: What about refugees?

TOMSETH: With the collapse of all three governments in Indochina in 1975, there was an immediate outpouring of Lao and Vietnamese. Over the next few years, they were joined by Cambodians and then a lot of Vietnamese boat people. The initial exodus from Vietnam tended to be people who clearly were associated with us during the war. A lot of those got out at the time, although a number of them began showing up in Thailand who had come overland through Laos or Cambodia. But in the late 1970s, this phenomenon of boat people began. At one point, Thailand had a huge number of refugees and displaced people. Many of the Cambodians that showed up were not classified as refugees, but as displaced persons. There were close to half a million Cambodians and at any given moment, 100,000 plus Lao and scores of thousands of Vietnamese. All of that led to several things in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One was the first Geneva accords on refugees, which in effect established a mechanism for dealing with refugees, Lao and Vietnamese for the most part, some Cambodians. That was that Thailand and other countries in the region would provide first asylum to anybody who showed up and other countries would be the destination of ultimate third country resettlement. Among those other countries, the United States, Australia, France, and Canada were the big four.

Another thing that we did and several other countries copied to a degree in Vietnam was to establish something called an Orderly Departure Program. We sent people in to actually interview and screen Vietnamese who might be eligible for resettlement in the United States under the criteria that had been developed in the course of this first Geneva system of the accords on Indochinese refugees. In effect, we were taking people for resettlement in the United States out of Vietnam before they ever became refugees. That was ongoing all through the 1980s. What you had in Vietnam were a lot of people who didn't have close association with the United States during the period of the Vietnam War who nonetheless didn't want to stay in Vietnam for whatever reasoneconomic reasons, reasons of ethnic identity (a lot of ethnic Chinese), reasons of their religiowho again started taking boats in the mid 1980s. At first when they showed up on Thai shores, the Thais abided by what had been agreed to at Geneva, but by 1986, their numbers started getting out of hand at the same time in the processing that was going on in Thailand, third countries, the United States included, had begun to reach the bottom of the barrel. They started coming to people who didn't meet anybody's criteria. So, that the Thais saw was "We're going to get stuck with the dregs. In addition to that, we're getting a whole bunch of new people who may or may not meet the criteria that had been agreed to in Geneva." So, they started pushing boats off and the Indonesians and Malaysians started doing the same thing. That led to a second set of Geneva accords that redoubled the Orderly Departure Program and for the first time set up a screening program whereby it would be determined whether or not these Vietnamese arriving in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Australia even, Hong Kong (a lot of them went from North Vietnam to Hong Kong) would be determined whether or not they met refugee criteria, including these rather liberal criteria established at Geneva. If they didn't, they would be repatriated to Vietnam. Vietnam would take them back. They would go back. There was a lot of controversy, needless to say, with this whole program, but during the time that I was on the desk and then for a bit after I arrived in Thailand, you had this series of negotiations that led to the second set of Geneva accords and then the implementation of it while I was DCM in Thailand and even later when I was ambassador in Laos, that went on. Laos was included in those Geneva agreements, although by the end of the 1980s, there were very few people coming out of Laos anymore. Those who wanted to leave had pretty much left. Those who wanted to be resettled had pretty much been resettled. Among the Lao refugees, there was a small number of lowland Laos who had not met criteria for one reason or another and a much larger number of highland Laos who would qualify, but had opted not to be resettled in the United States. The reasons for that were fairly complicated, but a major factor in it had to do with a resistance movement in Laos and the reliance on this resistance movement on the refugee population, particularly highlanders, in the camps in Thailand as a recruitment base. So, that issue had to be dealt with in a way. Even at the time I was ambassador in Laos from 1993 1996, it was still being dealt with.

Q: Did you find yourself in the State Departmenor was it dealt with by a different organizatiodealing with the Thais to assure them that we were going to do everything we could to take care of the people who came there?

TOMSETH: All the time. On the Thai side, the central coordinating point for all of this... As you can readily imagine, it was a multi ministry operation. Interior was responsible for running the camps. You had the Ministry of Health and all sorts of Thai government agencies that were involved in this. But the central coordination agency was the National Security Council. The secretary general of the National Security Council was the most senior person who was in a day to day decisionmaking position. So, when things got really sticky, somebody had to march off and see the secretary general of the National Security Council to try to sort this out. That was a role that fell to the DCM, certainly during my time, in part because I could deal with these guys in Thai. They found it a lot easier and we just seemed to get more done quicker when we did it that way.

Q: I can see two groups that might have been hitting you hard. These were people who were really true believers. One is the POW/MIA type people and the other are the refugee applicants. Did you get these or were they deflected to other bureaus?

TOMSETH: Oh, no. In Washington, you mean, during this...

Q: Yes.

TOMSETH: No. On the POW/MIA stuff, that was very much in the State Department a desk issue, an EAP issue. On refugees, you had the Refugee Bureau, of course. They were responsible for fielding the personnel who went off to Geneva or wherever it was they were having the negotiating meeting on whatever issue it was at the moment. They had the money that went into the Orderly Departure Program. We put money into UNHCR and directly into Thailand for supporting these refugee and displaced person camps and populations. The budget item, that was part of their appropriation. We didn't control that, but we worked very closely with them in managing all of this. So, refugees too were very much a desk issue.

Q: What about the POW/MIAs? In a way, Thailand was not part of it, but Thailand was the springboard for people going off. This was a group that I would think by 1986 1989 you would have felt that, yes, maybe we could find some bodies, but certainly no prisoners of war. Did you find that you were having to deal with some very difficult people?

TOMSETH: That's putting it mildly! Yes. At that time, the U.S. policy on MIAs waand it still is todathat no substantial evidence had been produced indicating that there were live POWs anywhere in Indochina, but there was insufficient information and evidence available to rule out the possibility. That is the approach you take. You can't rule out the possibility, although all of the evidence that has been produceand now you've got 13 more years of ihas never produced a shred of evidence that would indicate that in fact there are POWs still being held somewhere in Indochina. That is the U.S. government policy.

Then you have individuals and groups of individuals who are absolutely convinced that there are people there. In the early days of the Reagan administration, the Reagan administration came in with a very strong inclination to believe that if you couldn't prove it, there was a high probability that there were. The Reagan administration lent a lot of new momentum to tracking down leads. By 198they had been in office for five plus years at that poinl think the failure to turn up any evidence dampened the enthusiasm of some, but certainly not the willingness to follow up on any lead that might materialize. You had individuals and groups in the United States that were, because of their convictiothey were prisoners therwere always on the lookout for leads, which if they could find one and push that with the apparatus in the U.S. government, based in Defense, but certainly involving the State Department and the NSC to track it down. This was market economics. Where there was a demand, a supply will materialize. In Indochina, that supply developed. You got all sorts of things: people who produced bones, photographs, people. We've got pictures of a POW. One of these groups would show up in Bangkok; Orange Country, California; San Antonio; wherever. Hey, we've got a photograph. Track it down.

Q: Did the groups come to you at all? Did you find yourself having to deal with this?

TOMSETH: They tended to zero in on Defense. There was an office in Defense that was and is... It's gone through a couple of metamorphoses over the years, but in effect, it's been operating continuously for the last 20 years. But where we would come in is that these people would lobby us, too. If they thought Defense wasn't responding quickly enough, they'd lobby the State Department, the NSC, and several different family organizations and some of these true believers are involved in the family organizations (not necessarily the leaders themselves, although the biggest of these, the National League of Families Missing and POWs in Southeast Asia... It goes on forever, but is usually known as the National League of Families.) has been headed by the mother of one of these MIAs for years and years. She is a very forceful, effective in a bureaucratic sense, woman, and she is responsive to her constituency. So, if something surfaced, she is there to push it.

Q: What about the other element in relationships and dealing with it from your bureau's point of view, and that is drugs, narcotics?

TOMSETH: By the mid 1980s, Thailand was only a minor producer of opium. Over the years, the Thais had carried out a fairly effective program of crop substitution and manual eradication so that there wasn't very much opium being produced in Thailand. There is still a bit. The king has been involved in this for a long, long time. He is very interested in national development as a generic issue, but particularly interested in the issue of development in highland areas where the minority groups that traditionally produced opium live. His view was that you cannot take away the main source of livelihood of these people unless you give them some alternative. For a long time, the Thai approach was, you teach them how to grow potatoes or vegetables and other substitute crops, but was not proactive on the stick side. It was just carrots. By the 1980s, there was a general realization that you needed both carrots and sticks, that you had to have development incentives to be sure. What these guys figured out was, I'll grow some asparagus, but I'll grow some opium, too, and sell them both. So, by the 1980s, Thailand had a manual eradication program. They wouldn't spray and they still won't spray. I am not so sure that I don't agree with that. But Thailand was not as significant an opium producer as it is today.

However, during that period, some of the refining operations... There had always been some refining in Thailand, but in the 1980s, some of these groups based in Burma had really set up major refining operations right along the Thai Burmese border. They wanted them as close as possible to the transportation system in Thailand. So, the operation of refineries was an issue.

The big issue, of course, was Thailand as a transit country. These opium refined into heroin being funneled through the Thai transportation system into the international market. So, when I was on the desk, one of the issueand this had actually begun before I came on the deswas wiping out those refineries. That required a joint U.S. Thai effort. In this case, it was CIA that was funding it, actually created a special Thai military task force to go after these refineries. So that was ongoing. By the time I finished up on the desk, refineries in Thailand had pretty much been dealt with, so the overwhelming focus was on Thailand as a transit country and then using Thailand as the base for information collection, particularly on Burma, but on Laos to a degree as well, even Cambodia in the case of marijuana, as a base of operations for gathering intelligence in neighboring countries o(end of tape)

The DEA in Thailand had a very substantial presence. While I was on the desk and then later on as DCM in Thailand at any given moment, they had about 35 40 agents working in Thailand. There was a period in the 1970s when DEA agents actually participated with Thai cops in narcotic busts. They were allowed to carry arms. They were integral parts of these teams. By the mid 1980s, that policy had been changed. The great concern was that you were going to get a DEA agent shooting somebody. The policy was that the DEA certainly worked very closely with the Thai cops on cases, setting up, would even go along as a witness to but not a participant in the bust... That can be a pretty fine line. DEthese guys are cops. A lot of them are recruited from police forces. The instinct of many of these people is to kick down doors, take names, and kick butt. While I was on the desk and then later on as DCM in Thailand, yes, we did have occasional incidents in which agents went beyond their current policy mandate. I guess the most egregious example while I was on the desk was actually the base chief in Chiang Mai got his picture in "The New York Times" in a bust with the Thai police. He had a foot on the back of one of the perps (perpetrators) handcuffing him. He is bending over and he's got his weapon tucked into his pants. That is what you see in this picture in "The New York Times." Not only was it a clear overstepping of that fine line. It was not the sort of publicity that the U.S. government wanted to have.

Q: While you were on the desk, were there any concerns about changes in government? I'm talking about coups and that sort of thing. Did we have a pretty firm line on how we were going to deal with this sort of thing?

TOMSETH: In the early 1980s, there had been a couple of coup attempts that failed. We had taken a very unequivocal position on those. We fully backed the governments in both cases. They were different governments, but they were headed by the same person. While I was on the desk, there would occasionally be rumbles, rumors, that the military might be up to something, but by that point, the conventional wisdom was becoming, well, coups in Thailand really are passe. While a government resigned while I was on the desk and there was an election and a new government formed, during that three year period, I can't recall a rumor ever getting to the point where anybody took it terribly seriously.

Q: Alas, before we stop this session, at that time, what was the feeling towards the Thai royal family from our perspective?

TOMSETH: I think the very longstanding view of the U.S. government towards the royal family is that as an institution it is a very important factor in Thai political stability and notwithstanding the fact that governments change regularly in Thailand... I think the current government probably is coming about as close to the longevity record of any in the last 30 years. I think they had their third (or was it only two?) anniversary in November. That is sort of the scale of magnitude that we're talking about. Notwithstanding the fact that governments change regularly and that sometimes the military has been involved in those changes, in policy terms, Thailand has a remarkable record of political stability. The view in Washington is that the institution of the monarchy has been a very important factor in that. You can point to a number of examples, one of which was in 1973 where student demonstrations led to the fall of the then military regime. At that point, the king really for the first time stepped in very directly and told the two senior military leaders that it was time for them to go and not only should they leave office, they probably should leave the country. He then indicated that he wold not be adverse to having a member of his privy council, a fellow who had been the president of the supreme court and a very respected person serving as an interim prime minister. It was a very deft move, first telling Tunom and Prapat that they should leave and then engineering this interim premiership of this former supreme court justice and member of the privy council as interim prime minister. It led to a very smooth transition. In a number of different ways, the institution of the monarchy has played that role. I think, in this period, that certainly was the view of the U.S. government: as an institution, it's a very important thing in Thailand.

Also at this time, the king was about to have his 60th birthday. One aspect of Thai culture is, they've adopted the Chinese 12 year calendar cycle. Completion of the fifth cycle is a particularly important one. So, there was a great deal going on in Thailand to commemorate the completion of the fifth cycle in 1987 of the king. The U.S. got involved in that as well. A great deal of effort went into selecting a gift from the President to the king to commemorate completion of his fifth cycle. The embassy in Bangkok, led by the Foreign Service national staff, organized a fund-raising drive to build a traditional Thai pavilion on the grounds of the embassy. It's quite a beautiful building. This was done as something to recognize the completion of the fifth cycle by the embassy staff. The American business community in Thailand did the same thing. They raised money to build a pavilion at... There was an exhibition on some crown property land that then subsequently was turned into a big park on the outskirts of Bangkok. The American business community raised money to build an American pavilion on the grounds for this exposition. That exemplified the official and not so official American view of the importance of the institution of the monarchy and the particular role that this king has played in the Thai political context over the last three decades certainly.

We can talk about individual members of the royal family and the institution of the monarchy as an environment for raising children, if you would like. I don't know that there is an official view on that, but I can give you my private view.

Q: Alright. Let's hear your private view.

TOMSETH: I don't know whether we talked about this earlier in the context of Iran, but senior leadership positions tend to foster the kind of "boy in a bubble" syndrome. It becomes increasingly difficult to have a grip on reality in these positions. It is exceedingly so when the external environment treats the boy in the bubble as something even more than human. That is the case with the Thai monarchy. For Thais, the monarchy as an institution is almost a sacred institution and the people within it are more than merely mortal. If you're in that position, having some sense of the real world, it's like George Bush and how much does a carton of milk cost. Multiply it several times. It has an effect on the people within it that is not always very positive. You see that with some of the royal children, the Crown Prince in particular. Even with the king, who is a person who started out as a bit of a playboy, but over time became a very serious person and became very interested in a lot of things that are important to his country, national development being one of them, but because he does live in this bubble, it is often very difficult for him to know what is really real.

Q: At this time, what about the influence of Thais coming to the United States, getting educated, either going back or establishing the Thai community? I must say that today we've got an awful lot of Thai restaurants. How did you find that at this timand, of course, with your wife being Thai?

TOMSETH: We're talking about this period I was on the desk.

Q: Yes.

TOMSETH: Let me just say first that over the years among nationalities who have come to the United States for non immigrant reasons (as students or whatever), the Thais have one of the best records, if "best" is the right adjective, in terms of ultimately going home. The vast majority of Thais really like to be in Thailand. They like their food, for one thing, and I don't blame them. But starting in the 1950s, and it accelerated substantially in the 1960s and 1970s, a huge number of Thais came to the United Stats for education or training of one sort or another. Inevitably, some of those people wind up staying longer than they intended. You also have a phenomenon of a lot of Thais, whether doing so when they were students here in the United States or because Americans went to Thailand, married Americans. So, you have in relative terms a substantial community of Thai American families, where one partner is Thai and the other is American here in Thailand, and also one in Thailand, although not nearly as large there as it is here. But on the desk, what struck me waand bearing in mind that the vast majority of people who had come in the 1950s 1970s had gone back to Thailanlooking at the upper levels of Thai society, whether you're talking about government bureaucrats, academicians, or businesspeople, American graduates were everywhere. If you look at the Thai government today, the Thai cabinet, the Thai bureaucracy, the universities, the business community, the people who run that country are people who have been to the United States for education or training. Compared to those who have European or Japanese educations or training, it's the American alumni who absolutely predominate. That was very noticeable during my time on the desk. The embassy here was filled with people who had had part of their education in the United States. The people that we dealt with in Thailand, same thing.

Q: Did you find this gave an attitude which might be somewhat different from the Thais? In other words, they could sit down and talk to an American in the manner that an American might be accustomed to, as opposed to... One always thinks of the obliqueness of the Asian society.

TOMSETH: It did a couple of things. One is, yes, the common vocabulary is immensely useful. You can sit down with somebody and whether you're speaking in Thai or English doesn't matter so much. There is this common intellectual vocabulary that you can draw upon by virtue of this phenomenon. But the other thing that I noticed in coming back to the desk and then later on going on to Thailand was that you had a generation of Thais who by virtue of this American experience in some ways were much more confident of themselves as Thais than the people that I knew when I was in Thailand the first time who by and large didn't have that kind of experience. Rather than turning them into ersatz Americans, it really made them more confident Thais.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point? We'll pick up next time in 1989 when you're off to Thailand as deputy chief of mission. We'll talk about how you go the job and so on.

TOMSETH: Okay.

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Q: This is August 30, 1999. You were in Bangkok from 1989 to when?

TOMSETH: To 1992, three years.

Q: Who was ambassador there?

TOMSETH: Dan O'Donohue was when I went. He had gone the year before, 1988. I guess even before he went, I knew that I was going to be his choice to replace Joe Winder, who was then DCM in Bangkok.

Q: Did Dan pick you?

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: When you got there, what were relations like with Thailand?

TOMSETH: They were good. By and large, throughout the entire period since World War II, we've had a very close and cooperative relationship with Thailand. It had gone through a little bit of a rough patch in the mid 1970s, something we talked abut in an earlier session. But when I got there in 1989, the relationship was really in pretty good shape, although it had changed a good deal from the time I had been in Thailand the first time in the late 1960s to 1971. At that time, it had been overwhelmingly a relationship based on mutual security concerns. By 1989, it had become much more complex. The mutual security consideration was still there, particularly as it pertained to Cambodia. At that time, the Vietnamese still had an occupation force in Cambodia and we and others, including Thailand, were very much engaged in looking for some kind of a negotiated settlement to that issue. But economics had taken on a much more important dimension than they ever had 20 years earlier.

Q: I've had a long interview with Dan O'Donohue. From your perspective, how did Dan operate in Thailand and how did he use you?

TOMSETH: I guess I have to say by way of preface that Dan is one of the smartest guys I know. I think he was really a very good ambassador in Thailand in that we had this huge, very diverse diplomatic mission. When I got there, there was something in excess of 500 U.S. government direct hire personnel and over 2,000 Foreign Service nationals who worked for one agency or another, and assorted contract and other kinds of people that were all part of that. The things that they were engaged in ranged from the traditional kinds of Foreign Service things (the political, economic, consular, and administrative functions that every embassy has to deal with) to things as unusual as a joint U.S. Thai military medical research facility, a very big one, that is involved in the study of tropical diseases and experiments with new medicines to treat those sorts of things. Most people simply wouldn't be able to keep up with all of the things that were going on in that mission, but Dan O'Donohue was an exception to that rule. Not a sparrow fell in that mission that he didn't know about it.

In terms of how Dan and I worked together, I think you have to know a little bit about Dan. He is a very volatile Irishman, brilliant, but I think some people would say his people skills might leave a little bit to be desired.

Q: I'm thinking of Dan's rather pugnacious Irishism and your rather low keyed Scandinavianism.

TOMSETH: Yes. Dan knows himself. I think one of the factors in his decision to take me as his deputy was that he knew he could rant and rave about all sorts of things and it wouldn't particularly upset me and that then I could go out and implement what he wanted to be done in a way that wouldn't upset everybody else. It really worked quite well.

I have one funny thing that illustrates working with Dan. We had a doctor there who shall go nameless. He was doing some pro bono work at one of the local universities. When Dan heard about this, without asking what the nature of it was, he jumped to a conclusion, which was that he was working on government time, and blew up at him. I came into this to patch things up afterwards. When I was talking to the doctor, he was understandably rather indignant, but we ended the discussion by him saying, "But he yelled at me!" I said, "Jesus Christ, he yells at me every 30 seconds! If I can live with it, you can live with it."

But that was Dan. As I said, he knew it. I think he was perceptive enough to try and put somebody between him and the rest of the staff, at least most of the time, so that his pugnacious quality didn't really seriously affect the staff morale. I think he and I worked very well together in that regard.

Q: How did you use your time? Here is this huge embassy with all sorts of things going on and the pitfall always is that whoever is the DCM will fall back on his or her former specialty, usually economic, administrative, or political. Joe Winder was an economist. How did you find yourself?

TOMSETH: I had been a political officer for the most part and had a lot of prior experience dealing with Thailand from that very first Foreign Service assignment to a couple of stints on the desk, once in the mid 1970s and then as director just prior to going to Bangkok. I thinand you'd really have to ask other people in the embassy, I suppose, to get a confirmation of ithat I didn't really try to be the super political counselor, although I was available for the kind of institutional memory or the lore of U.S. Thai relations that people who didn't have as much involvement in Thai affairs as I had had. What I found is that I really liked and I think I had some talent for the management aspect of being a DCM. Consequently, I tried (and I think I was reasonably successful) letting the political counselor run the Political Section and the economic counselor run the Economic Section, let various people in the mission do what they were there to do and to focus my time and energy on what Dan wanted me to do, which in effect was to be the CEO of this company while he was the chairman of the board.

Q: We've talked about before when you were on the desk. Here you are in the field. How did you see the Thai government anhow did we deal with it at the embassy level?

TOMSETH: Most of the time that I was there, the government was an elected coalition government headed by a guy who had been involved in Thai politics for years and years going clear back to the time that he himself had been in the army and his father was the army commander in chief. Then in 1957, he at that time was the youngest brigadier general in the army. The fact that his father was commander in chief I'm sure had nothing to do with it. But there was a coup in 1957 and the fact that Pin Chunawan, Chai Chai Chunawan's father, was in lost out. But in typical Thai fashion, they don't sort of execute the losers. They send them off to be ambassador somewhere. Chai Chai went to Argentina, which if you get out a globe is just about physically as far away from Thailand as you can get. He served in Argentina and then he was in Europe for a while and then had come back to Thailand when I was there the first time in the late 1960s and eventually wound up first as deputy foreign minister and then foreign minister and then was in politics. He had been elected as prime minister just shortly before I got to Thailand in 1989 and was prime minister most of the time that I was there. But as somebody who had been around for a long, long time, he was also almost by definition somebody that was very well known to people in the United States government. In that sense, working with him and his government was fairly easy in the sense that we did have this kind of common historical political vocabulary.

As I mentioned the other day, the government by that time was filled with all these people who had been students or in some fashion had been trained in the United States, so dealing with people was usually very easy. That didn't mean we didn't have issues. We did. Probably the most difficult ones tended to be trade related issues, but because we did have this long history of dealing with one another cooperatively, it usually meant that you could find ways to work through these things in a spirit of cooperation. So, unlike some places I've been, dealing with the government wasn't difficult, although specific issues could be kind of thorny.

Q: You mentioned trade. I always think of rice... We're up against California, Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas. How about rice?

TOMSETH: By the time I got there in 1989, the impact of the 1985 Farm Act really had dissipated. At that time and for the previous couple of years, the international rice market had been very good for both Thailand and the United States. So, during the three years that I was in Bangkok, we really didn't have a great deal of difficulty on rice.

But on some other issues we did. Tobacco was one. Textiles weralways a difficult issue. By that time, Thailand was a major exporter of garments to not only the United States but other parts of the world as well. Every time a factory in Thailand branched into a new category and started exporting significant quantities of whatever it was, whether it was tee shirts or ladies blouses, it didn't really matter, we would try to put limits on that and enter into negotiations to establish some kind of quota regime for that particular product. So, that went on and on and on.

Q: How does one establish a quota on tee shirts? You're hurting our market. What is our bargaining? What is our bargaining?

TOMSETH: The regime has changed since then. At that point, we had something called Multifiber. It was a provision of U.S. law and even though you would never get away with it under the current World Trade Organization rules, at that time what the law provided for was that if exports from a county into the United States in certain categories surged, the U.S. government claimed the right to in effect call for negotiations to establish some orderly growth limits in that particular category. Basically, it was a process of a bully, the biggest kid on the block sitting down with these usually developing country textile exporters and establishing some kind of a regime that would allow them to continue to export in that category and even a little bit of growth, but not unlimited access to the U.S. market. The rationale that was often advanced was that we have to do this because there are multiple exporters in the world and in the interest of fairness to everybody, we want some order in the market. The reality was that this was really driven by special interests in the United States, labor unions certainly being one of them and U.S. manufacturers of a particular product being another. So, what you would find in these negotiations very often (I knew this probably better from the desk than from the embassy because more often than not the negotiations were in Washington.) is that you would have a U.S. team being made up of USTR (U.S. Trade Representative), which was always in the lead in these things, but they had representation from the industry, the Department of Labor, Treasury usually sat in on it, and the State Department. The State Department representative was the only person there who had some appreciation for the overall scope of the bilateral relationship, so the State Department representative tended to be regarded by the country that you were negotiating with as probably their best friend, although not an unqualified friend. The State Department, too, is part of the U.S. government and charged with enforcing this law. But in the negotiations, the other aspects of the bilateral relationship that might be important were most likely to be raised by the State Department representative and he or she would try to make sure that those considerations were factored in along with how many people were being put out of work in South Carolina.

Q: How about tobacco? Tobacco always seems to be a problem.

TOMSETH: At that time, this was the Bush administration. Not too long before I got to Thailand, we had made a major breakthrough in Korea and, I think, Taiwan, the first Asian markets where there had been some success in breaking down the high tariff barriers that virtually all these countries had against foreign tobacco products, not because they were anti tobacco, but because they were trying to protect the local tobacco industries. Thailand was seen as the next big Asian market where we had a chance of getting in. We brought a lot of pressure to bear on the Thais to lower their tariff barriers against foreign tobacco. Ultimately, it was successful. We did succeed in negotiations. I think, as I may have mentioned the other day, a lot of people in the embassy who were involved in this were not terribly happy with the policy, but not to the extent they were prepared to quit their jobs. But one of the consequences of this negotiation, was it became a very public issue in Thailand. There was a lot of media play that focused on the United States as this great bully trying to pressure Thailand to do away or at least to modify the tariff regime to allow foreign tobacco products in. One of the unintended consequences of that was that it gave a lot of strength to the anti smoking lobby in Thailand. Starting with those negotiations, that group in Thailand has been increasingly successful in getting restrictions put on tobacco, whatever the source, in terms of warning labels and where you can smoke and where you can't smoke. So, I think people like myself who weren't terribly happy about trying to force open this market for U.S. tobacco products at least got some vicarious satisfaction out of what happened in terms of the filip that it gave to the anti smoking forces in Thailand itself.

Q: There seems to be a pattern. Textiles seems to be the first thing when a country is really getting going and then they start moving into the electronics field, the assembly and then pretty soon other things develop. This is where it really becomes quite sophisticated. Was that happening?

TOMSETH: Yes, although while I was there, this was not a trade issue. You had a significant amount of American investment in the electronics field. The largest by far was Sia Technologies, which makes hard disk drives. I think their single largest overseas operation is in Thailand. At one point at least, they were even the largest or the second largest employer and the single largest private sector employer in Thailand. They had several manufacturing facilities in Thailand making parts of or assembling hard disk drives for computers. So, what you got in that case was the import into Thailand of bits and pieces of these drives that might have been made somewhere else in Malaysia or even in the United States and the assembly of the hard disk drives and then the export of the drives either back to the United States or to wherever the computers were being put together. In that sense, very much a part of what's happening in manufacturing generally, where it becomes increasingly difficult to tell just exactly where something was made because it was made everywhere. Motorola and AT&T all had fairly large basically assembly operations in Thailand. That trend has continued, although it's set back a bit in the last couple of years by the Asian financial crisis, but I think it's only that, a setback. It's not going to stop.

Q: How did you find the Thais? As we look at the world today, 10 years later, there is a very definite spot in India that many of the college graduates are particularly adept at computer programming and seem to be... You would have been at the beginning, but were you seeing an interest in the Thais mentality, culture, system, and all that was getting interested in this?

TOMSETH: Thailand and India really are fundamentally different. India produces more engineers than any other country in the world by far. A lot of them are very good. It's also a very low labor cost country. So, what you've got there, particularly in the city in south central India that is sort of the Silicon Valley of India, basically what people there are doing is software related work using this pool of engineering talent that the Indian university system produces in quantities that far exceed what India otherwise could put to work. India is not a very significant player in manufacturing in the computer industry generally. In Thailand, what you have is a country with a university system that was created essentially to train people for government service and where the university system in the last 12 years or so has really been challenged to try to shift to chang(end of tape)

Q: You were saying Thailand was very hard pressed.

TOMSETH: The university system has been very hard pressed to make that transition and produce the kinds of high skilled people that you need in a modern industrialized manufacturing economy to fill all the jobs that are available that were created particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s during this period of tremendous growth in the Thai economy. They had to go overseas, particularly to the United States, and lure back some of these people who had for one reason or another wound up here or even hire foreigners to do some of these jobs. But where Thailand in this context has had a real competitive advantage is a fairly well educated, at least at the primary level, and relatively large rural workforce that could be moved into these manufacturing operations fairly easily. This is something that really comes out of traditional Thai culture: they have very goohand eye coordination. I mentioned Sia a moment ago. One time when I was charge, Sia was opening a plant. The prime minster, Chai Chai Chunawan, and I were among the guests of honor to cut the ribbon at this plant. When that was done, we then went through the plant and as we were... It's very antiseptic with people who are doing the work in these hermetically sealed rooms. You walk through a hall looking through the glass into the areas where people are working. When we had gone through the hall, one of the Sia people asked me if I had noticed anything particular when we had gone through it. I said, "Well, yes, how clean it was." He said, "No, no, not that. The people working?" I said, "No. They were at their microscopes working." He said, "Yes. In any other country where we have plants, if you brought the prime minister and the American charge down the central hall, everybody would stop and look up at them." Nobody had. These people just kept on working at what they were doing. He said that that was a major reason why they had concentrated so much of their hard disk assembly operations in Thailanbecause of the dexterity of the people doing this. If you look at traditional Thai handicrafts, you can understand where they get it or why it is sand their disposition not to be distracted by anything when they were working, that they were just really very good at this kind of work.

Q: What about intellectual property rights, patents and that sort of thing? That has been one of those bones of contention that's been there foremost and all. How was this?

TOMSETH: Again, both when I was on the desk from 1986 1989 and while I was in Thailand as DCM from 1989 1992, intellectual property rights were an issue. It was more the copyrights of video and audio than it was trademarks, although there was some pirating of trademarks going on in Thailand as well. I remember every time a congressional delegation would come out and rail at the Thais about their failure to protect intellectual property rights and then the next thing they wanted to do was go buy their fake Rolexes somewhere. But there was a fair amount of video and audio and then increasingly software piracy in Thailand during that period. So, that was on the trade agenda one of the things that we discussed perpetually. Ultimately, we made some progress, but again, it was one of those serendipitous things that probably helped more than the actual negotiations themselves. That was that during this period increasingly you had Thai artists or intellectuals who were producing not so much videos, but music and increasingly software that was also being pirated. When that began to happen, the Thai authorities had a greater interest in protecting intellectual property rights than they did when it was only American or foreign intellectual property rights that were being violated.

Q: What about two of the things that seemed to concern Thailand a great deal: drugs and refugees? Let's talk about refugees first. What was the refugee situation in 1989 1992?

TOMSETH: Just as I got there, a second Geneva Agreement on Indochinese refugees had been concluded. It pertained mainly to Vietnamese, but also to Laos as well. It was a way of mopping up what was left of the refugee issue that had begun with the fall of Saigon and the Indochinese countries in 1975. But it did something new for the first time. That was that it set up a screening process that would be overseen by the UN High Commission for Refugees. The purpose of it was to determine on an individual basis what had motivated the person to leave Vietnam or Laos. If it was for reasons other than those that qualify a person for refugee status (political persecution or persecution for reasons of ethnicity or religious persuasion), then the person was subject to return to his home country. Vietnam and Laos were part of this, so they had to agree that they would take these people back. But that made it in one sense a lot easier to deal with the Thais. It created a regime which allowed them to know that, one way or another, all of these people that had wound up on their doorsteand this was true of Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and all of the other so called "first asylum countries" around Southeast Asia as welthis population of people claiming refugee status would be dealt with, although it might take a fair amount of time to do so. So, during the period that I was DCM in Thailand, it was really implementation of this agreement rather than the kinds of issues that had been very much at the forefront while I was on the desk, which was peoplmostly Vietnamese, but some Laos as welcoming into Thailand and the Thais being unsure what would be done with these people and consequently being tempted to retool them, to push them back. That had stopped by 1989. That didn't mean that there weren't specific problems with refugees either individually or with groups. It had to be sorted out. But by and large, it was an issue of process rather than of policy by 1989. That is the Vietnamese and Laos.

There was also a very large Cambodian population. At that time, there were far more Cambodians than there were either Vietnamese or Laotians in Thailand. There were still 200,000 or so Cambodians in camps. But with the exception of the initial wave of Cambodians that had come out after 1975, these people were treated as displaced persons rather than refugees. They were regarded as people who would go home when conditions allowed. The issue there really was much more related to the political negotiations and the military operations of the Cambodian resistance aimed at securing some kind of an agreement that, in fact, would allow these people to go home. That actually occurred not too long before I left Thailand in 1992. When I did leave, people were beginning to go back to Cambodia. That in itself had issues that the U.S. was very much concerned with. Those related mainly to, first of all, the safety of the people going back to whatever areas in Cambodia they were going back to and then, secondly, the sustainability of resettling them in Cambodia. Would they be able to actually make a go of it? There, I think you have to bear in mind that some of these people had been in camps almost two decades. Many of them had been born in the camps and had never farmed and here they were supposed to go back to Cambodia and become rural peasants once again. So, needless to say, there was a lot of interest in the United States about how this program would be implemented and we spent a lot of time working on that with the UNHCR and with the various NGOs and PVOs that were involved in it.

Q: Were there still Khmer Rouge camps? In Cambodia, was a low level war still going on?

TOMSETH: Yes. The Khmer Rouge were for a long, long time the only really significant counterpressure on the Vietnamese occupation in Cambodia. There was an effort to try and create a viable non communist military force as well and with some degree of success. Towards the end of this period of war and negotiation, if you will, the non communist factions were able to seize a small strip of territory in northwestern Cambodia, which was very important in terms of giving them some credibility at the negotiating table. But for the most part, military activity, anti Vietnamese and the government that the Vietnamese had installed in Phnom Penh, was borne by the Khmer Rouge. They had in Cambodia, along that border, a number of camps that they used as their bases of operation. But in addition to that, one of the displaced persons camps in Thailand was a large reservoir of Khmer Rouge supporters. These were Khmer Rouge that had been pushed into Thailand in the early 1980s and then had settled in camps while the fighters went back into Cambodia when conditions permitted it.

In addition to that, all of these groupKhmer Rouge and the two non communist grouphad a safehaven in Thailand if they needed it. That was in the domain of the Thai military and the Thai army by and large. This actually put the U.S. government in a rather ticklish position. For very good reasons, in this country there was a lot of anguish about the Khmer Rouge, part of it driven by guilt because until 1978/1979 when it became clear what was going on in Cambodiclear because the Vietnamese sort of pushed everything out of Cambodia into Thailana lot of people in the United States turned their back on it, didn't want to know what was going on in Cambodia. So, in the 1980s, there was a great deal of concern about the Khmer Rouge in the Congress and among the American public. As a consequence, nobody in Washington really wanted to get too close to these people but because they were the only effective countervietnamese force in Cambodia, nobody really wanted to see them go away completely either. The Thai military played a very useful role in terms of being responsible for all of these groups along the border. Where no one in the United States for political reasons would dare touch the Khmer Rouge, the Thai military did it, not without criticism and they caught a fair amount of flack from some people in the United States for doing that, particularly when the closer you got to a peace agreement, the higher the criticism tended to grow. It was a critical role that they played in terms of bringing that about. They, in effect, did provide all of the groups, including the Khmer Rouge, sanctuary during the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Q: How did you all at the embassy deal with this? Did you just look the other way or just say, "Alright" or make pro forma protests? What did you do?

TOMSETH: It wasn't really easy. I'm not sure how much detail I can go into without getting into a realm that is not on the public record yet. You have to bear in mind that we had our own military assistance program in non lethal aid, but it was coordinated with ASEAN. There were several of the ASEAN countriethe Singaporeans, the Malaysians, the Thais, obviously, and I think even Brunei from time to time put some money into it to ensure that these non communist Cambodian groups had the military wherewithal to be credible on the battlefield, if you will. They were just barely so, but without that kind of assistance from ASEAN and from the United States, they wouldn't have been able to achieve even that. So, you had that program out on the border with these groups. At the same time, the Chinese were operating a program to make sure that the Khmer Rouge were adequately armed. The Chinese also contributed to arming the non communist factions as well. Trying to keep the U.S. ASEAN program hermetically sealed from what was going on with the Khmer Rouge when all of it was passing through the Thai military was a constant challenge, I must say.

Q: Were any Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, and the Hmong beginning to seep out of the camps and move into the Thai society?

TOMSETH: There was always a fair amount of that from the time people began to show up. It was a lot easier for lowland Laos than any of the others because of cultural and linguistic reasons. By the end of the 1980s in the Lao camps, the number of lowland Laos had diminished to just a few thousand. There weren't very many left. The vast majority of them either had been resettled in third countries or had found a way into Thai society. There was still a substantial body of Hmong, of mostly Hmong (There were a few other Lao highland groups.), probably about 40,000 in 1989 when I got there. By that time, this population really wasn't interested in going anywhere for several reasons, one of which was that some of the people from the old royal Lao regime including the preeminent Lao leader, who himself had come to the United States, the Hmong leader, were running a resistance operation out of the camps into Laos and they needed that population as their support base and as a basis of recruitment for resistance operations. So, they put a lot of pressure on people just to stay put. That wasn't the only reason they were doing it. But one of the issues we had to deal with is winding up that population. The Thais were not prepared to keep them forever. So, we, the U.S., found ourselves in a situation where we were trying to convince people you've got to make a choice. Do you want to go to the United States or Australia... Most of the Hmong were in the United States, but France, Australia, and Canada were taking a few. Do you want third country resettlement or do you want to go back to Laos? Those are the choices you have. You cannot stay in Thailand. As that pressure mounted, more and more of the Hmong also began drifting out of these camps into Thai society. It is much more difficult for a Hmong to conceal himself in Thai. society than it is for a lowland Lao. But one of the things that happened is that a monk at a temple icentral Thailand, actually a Magsaysay Award winner, which is sort of the Asian Nobel Peace Prize, who took these Hmong under his wing and set up in the environment of his rural temple a Hmong society in miniature and worked with them and was active in raising funds to make sure that they'd have enough to eat, shelter, and that sort of thing. Because of his political standing in Thailand, it was very difficult for the Thai government to say "You can't do this" because it was so obviously a humanitarian undertaking. But a substantial number of Hmong wound up there. At least during the time I was there, they were never able to do a census of them, so the guesstimates ranged from 3 4,000 to maybe as many as 10 12,000 Hmong that were settled in this area around this temple in Surabury in central Thailand.

Q: We're still in the aftermath of the Indochina War. What about the MIA/POW thing? Were you still getting reflections of this?

TOMSETH: Before we move to that, there is one other refugee population we haven't talked about and one that actually has become the most significant in Thailand, and that is Burmese. While I was still on the desk, but certainly during the period that I was in Thailand, these people began to show up in Thailand in increasing numbers. There had been ethnic based insurgencies going on in Burma for a long, long time, but during that period, the Burmese military had increasing success in their military operations against these people. So, what you started seeing was moving from a situation in which the Burmese military would go on offensive operations during the dry season, people would retreat into Thailand and then go back into Burma during the rainy season. Increasingly, these people started staying in Thailand on a more or less permanent basis. Then in 1988, you had the democracy movement in Burma that also produced a refugee outflow. These were ethnic Burmans, as opposed to Burmese minority groups. So that population increased very dramatically during the period that I was there and it is still there.

Q: Did we put this into a resettlement program or was this "somebody else do it?"

TOMSETH: No. First of all, given their experience with Indochinese, the Thais were not prepared to accept that they were refugees. They chose to treat them as displaced persons, as they had done with most of the Cambodians that had come after that first wave in the aftermath of 1975. That was an issue. From the point of the view of the U.S. and a number of other western governments, many of these people should be treated as refugees. They had fled Burma because they were persecuted for political reasonnot so much religious reasons, although Kurans tend to be Christians and some of these other Burmans are heavily Christiabut certainly ethnic reasons. The reason that Kuran and Shan and others wound up in Thailand as displaced people or refugees, whatever you wanted to call them, was because of their ethnicity.

Q: In a way, we were just watching, but not dealing with them.

TOMSETH: More than just watching. Sort of regularly going into the Thais and advising them on how we thought they should be treating these people and allowing UNHCR, for example, to have access to camps and to be able to provide assistance to people.

Q: Was there any pressure on us to turn this group, although it was obviously a mixed group, into a resistance movement, arming and doing that sort of thing?

TOMSETH: Not really much pressure via the U.S. government, whether from Congress or any other U.S. government quarter. What you had were a lot of veterans of the Indochina conflict who had become freedom fights, soldiers of fortune, if you will, some of whom had been involved with Indochinese resistance groups that had not gotten very far who then gravitated towards these Burmese groups. They were probably more of a problem for the U.S. embassy then they were for the Thai government, which knew pretty well how to deal with them and in some cases probably didn't even discourage them from doing what they were. But they could be a problem for the U.S. government and for the embassy in particular.

Among that Burmese refugee group, you have to separate a lot of these student activists who fled after 1988. Unlike the ethnic minorities, who did tend to stay fairly close to the border, many of these people wound up in Bangkok, where they had a lot of sympathy from Thai students, the Thai media particularly, and Thai academics, Thai intellectuals. They tended to do things that the Thai government found troublesome. They would demonstrate outside the Burmese embassy and chain themselves to the gate at the Burmese embassy, which forced the hand of the government to do something about them. They would get arrested and then the question became how do you treat them under Thai law? Typically, the conclusion was, well, do they have travel documents? Do they have a visa to be here? If not, you throw them in the immigration jail, sort of the way that we do with people who are undocumented illegal aliens. Then that became an issue in U.S. Thai bilateral relations. Our view was that whether they have documentation or not, they should be treated as political refugees, which they by our rights clearly were.

Q: What about the POW/MIA problem? Could you explain how it was from your viewpoint and how you all dealt with it?

TOMSETH: I think a little bit of history is in order. That is that after 1973 and the settlement with North Vietnam that resulted in the POWs that they were holding being released, neither the Nixon administration nor the Ford administration which followed nor the Carter administration were very interested in doing much to follow up. In World War II, after all, there were 40,000 or more casualties whose remains were never returned or identified. I think the feeling in those administrations, in the services really, was that this was just part of war, that you have people who don't come home and whose remains are not identified or repatriated. But in the 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan made an issue of this. Part of it was that probably almost as soon as people were released in 1973, because some people who had been known to be prisoners were not returned and were not accounted for, immediately, a view grew up that some people were still being held in Indochina. Reagan campaigned on that issue, that if he were elected, by God, he'd bring any Americans still being held in Indochina home and that he would account for these people who were missing in action. So, when he came into office in 1981, an effort was mounted to do a couple of things. One was to try and find out where live Americans might be held and to rescue them. In fact, one attempt to rescue Americans who were alleged to be held in a location in Indochina was actually mounted. Not only were they not there, it wasn't clear whether they had ever been there. But in addition to that, there was a major effort to try to find the means to recover and identify remains of people. Because we did not have diplomatic relations with either Cambodia or Vietnam and our relationship with Laos in that period was not very good, the main base of operations for both efforts was in Bangkok. We could operate out of there.

By 1989 when I got to Thailand, a couple of things had happened. One was that we were beginning to get some cooperation from both the Laos and the Vietnamese. During the course of the three years that I was there, the paradigm shifted substantially to the point where we were actually able to put military detachments into Panjim and Hanoi and then eventually Phnom Penh as well with the detachment in Bangkok still being the main logistics base for these operations that were planned in the three Indochinese countries. But most of the time that I was in Bangkok, the focus of the embassy really was on this logistics operation for operations into initially just Vietnam and Laos, but ultimately Cambodia as well.

Q: This is the official thing. Were you having these sorts of freeloaders wandering around? I'm talking about Americans particularly, either con men or dedicated fanatics or not? How did you deal with them? What were some of the problems?

TOMSETH: Yes, there were several people like thias you described them, dedicated fanatics or con men and some were both were a problem, in part because several of these people (They were almost exclusively former U.S. military.) had fairly good relations with people in the Thai military. Even when the government decided that Mr. X was a royal pain in the derriere and put him on an immigration lookout list, more than once, we had situations where one or another of these people were able to get into Thailand by exploiting their contacts with the Thai military to get around Thai immigration. They were the source of a lot of wild goose chases. Part of this operation was to try to develop information on anybody who might still be alive. These people tended to believe that there were lots of people alive. As I think I mentioned in an earlier session, it's the law of the market here that if there is a demand for something, that something will appear. If you want evidence of somebody being held in captivity, you will get photographs of somebody being held in captivity. These people tended to be great promoters of that. They would bring people who claimed to have evidence of live Americans somewhere in Indochina into the embassy. By that time, this had become a highly politicized issue in the United States. Given that fact, even in cases that seemed on the face of it absolutely ridiculous had to be taken seriously. The leads had to be followed up. We had a whole crew of people in Bangkok whose job it was to do just that, to develop information, as bad as it often seemed, about the possibility of live Americans being held in Indochina and then trying to track it down in Indochina.

Q: Moving on to drugs... The Drug Enforcement Agency has been over there for a long time. Everybody I've talked to who's dealt with Thailand has talked about the problems of dealing with essentially an enforcement agency that has a tendency to go off on its own. How was it working?

TOMSETH: At that time, DEA had its largest overseas presence anywhere in the world in Thailand. They had between 35 and 40 agents at any given moment and various support staff working with them. For the most part during the three years that I was deputy chief of mission, we didn't have any serious problems with DEA. The head and his deputy were pretty good. The deputy actually had served there in a previous tour in the late 1970s. They were pretty good.

The biggest problem you had with DEA was their constant desire to be cops. Their role in Thailand really wasn't law enforcement per se. It was to develop intelligence and to work with the Thai law enforcement agencies in the enforcement of Thai law, but it was the responsibility of the Thai cops to do the police work. The DEA agents were constantly tempted to get in there and be cops, too, and it was a temptation that sometimes they couldn't resist.

Q: Did you have much of a problem with Americans getting into trouble? I think about sex, drugs, and what used to be called a long time ago the "old China coasters," people who loved Asia and sort of settled in the community, but when they got in trouble became the American embassy's responsibility.

TOMSETH: By the end of the 1980s, the Consular Section, particularly in a country like Thailand that is on the major international travel routes, you're going to have a few cases where people do something and get thrown into jail for one reason or another or wind up destitute or overdose in a hospital, but that sort of thing was no greater than you would expect in any major capital on the international circuit. In the late 1970s/early 1980s, actually, in response to a lot of pressure from the United States to get tough with drug traffickers, a lot of Americans had been arrested by Thai authorities and convicted of trafficking offenses and had been given very long sentences. Thailand does have capital punishment, although it's very seldom invoked, but a number of these Americans had been given life sentences in Thailand for trafficking offenses. That led to a buildup of the American long term prisoner population in Thailand. At one point, I think they had 50 60 Americans serving long sentences in Thailand. That in turn led to pressure in the United States to work out some arrangement with Thailand where people convicted in Thailand and sentenced there could, after a period of time at least, be transferred to a U.S. prison facility. But by 1989, there were 30 or more Americans still serving in Thai prisons for drug related offenses. This was a major burden for the Consular Section. They had to be visited regularly. Thailand, like a lot of countries, has a provision where prisoners can receive money to buy incidentals and some things can be brought into them. So, one of the things that the Consular Section was involved with with these people was seeing that they were visited once a month and that they got a small stipend and that they got dietary supplements to make sure that they were healthy. But we didn't have a significant number of Americans arrested for trafficking offenses during the three years that I was there.

Q: You were there during the Gulf War and the oil crisis. What was the effect on Thailand? This was when Saddam Hussein invadeKuwait. Did Thailand become involved at all?

TOMSETH: To a degree, a fairly important degree, but it wasn't what I wold call a major involvement. During the buildup prior to the war itself, there obviously was a major operation to get people and equipment in place and things moving out of the Pacific Theater into the Gulone way is right across the KRA Isthmus. There is a major naval and air base at Rutapow and Sedaheep. So, having access to those facilities is quite important for that buildup. Again, we're talking about our relationship with the Thai government and Chai Chai Chunawan and the prime minister. remember very well in the early fall of 1990, we got on a Saturday morning a cable from Washington saying, "Can you get access to Rutapow for flights through to the Gulf? Yesterday would have been better than today, but certainly we want it today." Dan wa(end of tape)

Dan O'Donohue, our ambassador, was able to call the prime minister at home on a Saturday morning, get a meeting with him within an hour or so, go over to his house, and secure his authorization for U.S. use of those Thai military facilities to support the buildup participatory to the war. That was the kind of relationship that we had with the Thai government and with the key individuals in it.

Q: Was there general approval of what was being done?

TOMSETH: Oh, yes. And when the war actually began, it was something that the Thais, at least the Thais in Bangkok, were very interested in. You could follow it on CNN. In fact, there was a funny incident when the war began. Thailand has not really like the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It's a Supreme Command. It's supposed to be an interservice command structure for their military. But it functions a little differently than the Joint Chiefs of Staff in our military. In any event, the supreme commander, an army general at that point, called up Dan and told him he was watching the war on CNN. Dan said, "Well, you're ahead of us. We don't have a satellite dish either at the embassy or at my house, so we've been getting other kinds of reporting on it, but I haven't actually seen any of the pictures." A couple of hours later, the supreme commander's communications people were at Dan's residence and installed a satellite dish so he too could watch the war.

Q: I've heard people say that in some African countries, almost everything stopped while they watched this war. It was fascinating.

TOMSETH: This shows the nature of the relationship we had with the Thai government. Just before the war broke out, on a Friday evening, we had a walk in who was an Arab who had lived in Thailand for a long time. He was married to a Thai. He told the Marine security guard, "I have some information I think you, the American embassy, should know about." It turned out that this guy had been recruited by some agents out of the Iraqi embassy to help set up some kind of an attack against the U.S. in Bangkok. This was part of a larger operation that the Iraqis had in Southeast Asia.

Q: In the Philippines

TOMSETH: In the Philippines and Indonesia. In Indonesia, they actually got so far as to rig a bomb in a flower pot on the terrace at the ambassador's house, but it had not been properly wired and a gardener found it and it was disposed of.

In the Philippines, a couple of people were wiring, setting, a device outside the Binational Center when it went off and blew them away.

In Bangkok, what they had opted for was to go after some senior people in the embassy, the ambassador and myself being the first two choices. But this fellow whom they had recruited to help set this up had a bad conscience at the last minute and walked into the embassy and told us about it, whereupon we engaged everybody in the embassy involved in this (the security officer, the station chief) and quickly got the Thais involved in it. In fairly short order, they were able to round up the two people in the embassy who were the leaders of the operation and four others in the Iraqi embassy. They weren't able to do anything with the two people in the embassy (They had diplomatic status.) other than to work with us in getting them from Bangkok to Austria, as it turned out, where they could be arrested, and they were. But in that operation, the Thais worked very closely with us to track these people down and round them up and get them out of the country and into the hands of people who could arrest them.

Q: How were we viewing the economy, ASEAN and all that at that time? Not too long thereafter, about five or six years later, by the time you'd left, they had had quite an economic crisis. How were we viewing the economy when you were there?

TOMSETH: During the time I was there, two out of those three yeas, Thailand was the fastest growing economy in the world. They had about 13% growth one year and 14% the next. People were very bullish on the economy. I think there is still reason to be bullish on the economy, although the Asian financial crisis actually started in Thailand two years ago with the collapse of the bat. But even at that time, it was possible to see some problems, one of which was in real estate. I had been involved in Thailand long enough to see several building booms and busts. often, it was with hotels. Tourism is an important industry in Thailand. You would see the number of tourist arrivals overwhelming the capacity, a rush to build more capacity, more was built than demand could keep up with, and you would have a period of bust. But these usually were not terribly severe and didn't last that long before you started into another cycle. But by 1991 and 1992, I think it was becoming pretty clear that this time, it really was getting out of hand. There were several things that contributed to that. One was that in that cycle, it wasn't just hotels. It was luxury condominiums as well, a lot of which were being either leased or they changed the law so that foreigners actually could buy into condominium projects. There were just too many of these things going up. You had to ask yourself where are the customers going to come from?

Another factor was that the ability of private sector entities to borrow on the international market had changed dramatically from anytime I had ever seen in Thailand where the Thai banks, in effect, could go out and borrow as much money as they wanted because the Thai economy was doing so well and everybody in New York, Tokyo, and London thought this was the greatest thing since sliced bread and they were prepared to lend Thai banks whatever they wanted to borrow. This money in turn was then lent to the Thai private sector for the most part. A lot of that went into real estate projects that you really had to wonder whether or not they would be viable in the aggregate, individual ones, yes, but as many as were being built, you really had to doubt it. At one point, I thought that the construction crane had become the Thai national bird. There were just so many of them around Bangkok. One Sunday, my wife and I were at a Sizzler's. There was an American who's now become a Thai citizen. His father worked at VOwhen I was in Thailand the first time, in the late 1960s, and graduated from the International School in Bangkok and sorely disappointed his parents when he said he wasn't interested in going to college; he wanted to go into business. When I came back in 1989, his parents were no longer disappointed. He was a multimillionaire. One of the things that he had done was, he had gotten the Thailand franchises for things like Pizza Hut, one of the ice cream companies, and Burger King, and he had just gotten it for Sizzler, a steakhouse. He had invited us to come to his grand opening of Sizzler, which was on the second floor of a building in the Sukumwit area, which had been a residential area when I was there, but is rapidly becoming commercial. As I looked out of the window from this Sizzler restaurant that Sunday for lunch, I counted over 40 building cranes just from where I was sitting. That is an example of what was going on in Thailand at that point.

Q: Was the embassy sending up balloons... Was there some concern here or not or did this make any difference?

TOMSETH: Well, yes, the Economic Section regularly reported on anomalies in the Thai economy that the section believed needed to be watched in terms of what could be expected in the future. One of these, incidentally, was the shortage of engineers, architects, and MBAs that the Thai university system, which was unable to produce enough of them to meet the demand of this booming economy. This was 1991 and 1992, the fastest growing economy in the world. There was a lot more good news than there was bad news. Nobody was predicting a crash, although there were some things out there that bore watching. What ultimately led to the downfall in 1997, yes, this building boom beyond the demand for it certainly was a factor and lending was a factor, but what actually sparked the crisis was, for the first time in my memory, the Bank of Thailand actually didn't perform very well. This was an institution that had gained a reputation over a long period of time for a staff that was very competent and also very honest. In Thailand, you can't emphasize the honesty part too much. It may not be as bad as Indonesia or maybe some Latin American examples, but corruption was an endemic problem there. But the Bank of Thailand had this reputation for being very prudent and conservative and competent at the same time that its people were scrupulously honest. What happened to produce this crisis in 1997 was that the Bank, too, probably got carried away with the euphoria and wasn't as conservative and prudent as it should have been. In early 1997, people outside of Thailand began to conclude that the Thai economy simply could not be sustained at the levels of growth that it had been experiencing and that in the construction industry in particular, there had been a great deal of overbuilding, and that banks were overextended, and that put a lot of pressure on the bat. The Bank of Thailand initially tried to defend it, rather than cutting it loose, and cut very deeply into Thai reserves before they finally admitted they couldn't defend it and cut it loose, and that set off the chain reaction all around Asia. The same thing was happening in Korea, incidentally, which I think was the other big factor in the crisis.

Q: What sort of a factor did traffic play in people coming to Bangkok, the life of the city, the capital, and all that?

TOMSETH: I have never been in any place where traffic is as bad as it is in Bangkok. Teheran in the mid 1970s ran at a close second, but even there it wasn't as bad. The basic problem comes down to the way Bangkok was originally built. The original city was on a bend in the river and a canal was cut through the neck of that bend to create an artificial island. Then over the years, a series of radiating canals went out from that island center and a series of semi concentric canals were built around it. No roads. Travel in the city in the 19th century was by boat. The very first street in Bangkok was built only at the end of the 19th century in what was then Chinatown in Bangkok just outside of the capital area across that first of the concentric canals. Starting in the 20th century with the arrival of the automobile, they started filling in the canals to build roads, so the grid in Thailand is a number of fairly wide roads that radiate from the old center of Bangkok with a lot of very narrow sidestreets which were little side canals that never went through off of the main roads. Today, there are still relatively few throughroads. You had this series of spokes coming out of the center, but not connected with one another very often. That is one aspect of it. The other one is that the area of road, in a city of New York, where you have a grid, on average, around the world in major cities, roughly a quarter of the land area is in roads. That is true of New York City as an example. In Bangkok, it's less than 10% because of this original system of canals which were filled in to build roads. So, you have two big problems: not nearly enough area devoted to roads and the nature of the grid itself, which does not have very many connecting roads.

Q: I would have thought that that would have almost at a certain point precluded business from going to Bangkok, saying "The hell with it."

TOMSETH: When I was there the first time, even though the number of vehicles was nowhere near as great as it subsequently became, the traffic could be pretty chaotic. More than one time, I said to myself when I was stuck in Bangkok's traffic, "Someday, this is going to get so bad that people will just get out otheir cars and start walking." Well, they didn't. They air conditioned their cars. BY the time I got back the second time, not only were all the cars air conditioned so you could sit there in relative comfort, because of the time they were spending in them, people had gone to cellphones and even faxes in their cars so that they were doing business from their cars when then were stuck in traffic. Foreign investors, too, seemed to be prepared to put up with an inordinate amount of that sort of thing simply because the opportunity to make money was so great in Thailand and there are other things that compensate for it. We were talking about this a moment ago. The relatively well educated, even still relatively cheap, certainly in terms of hand eye coordination, very skilled workforce that you have available in Thailand, makes a two meeting a day Bangkok tolerable, not pleasant, but tolerable. It was a two meeting a day city. You really have a hard time scheduling three meetings in a day.

Q: Did this have much effect on the embassy or were you all able to work around it?

TOMSETH: Yes, in some ways. When I was there the first timand most of the government were down in or near the old part of the citour embassy, we acquired that property at the end of World War II. At that time, it was on the very edge of Bangkok. Now, it's not. But it's quite a ways from the old part of the city. In the 1960s, even though the traffic can be chaotic, you didn't think twice about setting up a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Finance Ministry, Interior, or whatever. In 1989, you did. You planned those meetings very carefully. You knew that it was going to take you a while to get there and it was going to take you a while to get back.

The other area where I noticed that it made a big differencand not necessarily a bad difference, although on balance, I would say it was mixewas in the area of representation. I mentioned in an earlier session that one of the jobs that I had in Thailand on my first tour was staff aide to the ambassador. He typically went to three events every night. The second time around, you could do one. If you were really foolhardy, you might try to do two. On the Thai side, in the 1960s, if they were invited to anything the American ambassador or even the American embassy did, you could pretty much count on them showing up. They might not bring their wife or you might bring their cousin (You never knew who they were going to bring along with them.), but they would come. In 1989, the rule of thumb on a guest list was, you would be lucky to get 50%.

Q: How did your wife find this, being Thai, and particularly with the royal family? Did she find this difficult, fun?

TOMSETH: She found the first year very difficult and sort of fled to the University of Montana. She had been teaching a course there anyway, so it was something that she had actually planned on doing. She came out in the summer of 1989 and stayed through the holidays, but then went back (Montana is on a quarter system.) for the winter and spring quarters. She found it very difficulnot because of the U.S. embassy. People there took her for what she wabut because of the Thais. Many of them really expected her to behave like a Thai. Her view was that she wasn't ashamed of the fact of having been born in Thailand, but she had long since become an American and she was there as the wife of an American diplomat and her first obligation was to the United States. As an example of the difficulties that she had, the Thai national day is the King's birthday, which is December 5th. Among the events that they do around the King's birthday, there is a reception for the diplomatic corps. BY the time we came back, the corps had grown to over 80 embassies, so they limited it to three couples from each embassy. What that usually meant was the ambassador, the DCM, and the Defense attache for us. That first year, I was charge. Dan and his family had come back to the United States for Christmas. So, in the reception, they started out by lining everybody up in a "U." The King would make some remarks to the corps and then he would go around with the Queen and various of the royal children and say a few words to each of the delegations. We were at the head of our delegation. If you're a Thai, you don't touch the royal family. You just never do.

Q: There is a story about somebody drowning because nobody was...

TOMSETH: It was a princess in the late 19th century. They were going from Bangkok up to Bonbayen, which was the old summer capital north of Bangkok on the Chopria River. The boat that this princess was riding in capsized and nobody could help her because they couldn't touch her. So, she drowned.

In any event, when the King and Queen came around to our group, Walapa curtseyed. The Queen stuck out her hand to shake hands, as she did with all the ladies in the other delegations. As Walapa was curtseying, she said, "You're Majesty, I'm Thai." The Queen said, "That's okay and took her hand and shook her hand." It was fine as far as the King and Queen, the royal family, were concerned. But all of the "royal orbiters," the ladies in waiting, a couple of whom had been Walapa's classmates in the university, were by and large rather upset by this. It wasn't easy for her. But by the second and third year, I think she sort of reached an accommodation with it. I think by that point, she had persuaded many of these people that she wasn't going to always act in quite the way a Thai would be expected to act in similar circumstances.

Q: I've heard Japanese experts say that they always have a problem with Japanese women who go to the universities in the United States. They walk differently. They are a different breed of cat by the time they come through. As I think you remarked earlier on, there has always been an affinity between the Thai and the Americans and considerable marriage and also students going away and coming back, which I assume would include some women, too.

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: Was it having a nasty revolutionary effect that people who go to the United States, particularly women, with it becoming a new world, were these beginning to make their way into the society?

TOMSETH: Well, the influence is certainly, but I think Thailand, for a variety of reasonthe one that's always trotted out is that unlike all of the other countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand never actually was a colonial dependency. It spent much of the latter part of the 19th century in an inferior status to the western colonial powers and was forced to sign some of these extraterritoriality treaties, but it never was a colonial dependency. But it's more than that. I think the Thai culture has always been a very open one. You can go back to the 15th and 16th century when various foreigners who showed up. There was a Persian who arrived and became a very influential person in the court at Eyutia. Many of his descendants many generations removed now are very prominent people in Thailand. There was an ethnic Greek from Lebanon, Constantine Falkan, who arrived in the 17th century and actually became the King's principal minister at one point. So, there has always been this openness to outsiders and a willingness to adopt foreign things and modify them so that they become Thai. That has certainly been the case with all of these people going abroad. Many of them were women and these days there are probably as many women Thai students in the United States as there are men. Certainly in the Thai foreign service, they've actually had to impose a semi official ceiling on women because so many of them were passing their foreign service exam and actually at the expense of the men. The ambassador here, who is an old friend, said that in recent years, over half of the people that they have been bringing into the foreign ministry are women, many of them with foreign educations, obviously. But I think one of the qualities of Thai society that has been very important in making the absorption of women with foreign educations relatively easy is that women have always played an important economic role in Thailand. At the risk of oversimplification, you can say the division of labor in a typical Thai family was that men would be in politics and the military. They would do the fighting and the politicking. Women controlled the pursestrings. So, a lot of these women with foreign educations have found a ready outlet in the business world. There are a lot of Thai women in senior positions in the Thai business world, including one of Walapa's sisters, who is a senior vice president of the Bangkok Bank, which is the largest of the Thai banks.

Q: I find this fascinating to watch this changand the change really in the United States, too.

I think this is a good place to stop, don't you?

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover the next time in Thailand before you move on?

TOMSETH: I think we've touched on... We've done Cambodia, refugees, POW/MIAs, Burma, drugs, and economic issues. That is an indicator of how much more complex this relationship had become.

Q: Yes. I've just finished a long interview with Bill Brown, who talked about all the complexities. From there, he went on to a very quiet time as ambassador to Israel.

In 1992, what happened?

TOMSETH: I left Bangkok in August of 1992 thinking I was probably going to be the selectee for Laos, but knowing that that position would not open up until the following year. So, I was headed for a parking lot operation for about a year. I came back to the United States as a diplomat in residence.

Q: Okay. We'll talk about that.

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Today is September 3, 1999. Victor, where were you a diplomat in residence?

TOMSETH: Up until just a couple of days before I left Bangkok in August of 1992, I thought I was going to the University of California at Davis. But that was in the midst of California's state budget crisis. UC Davis literally rented the building in which I would have been housed out to raise money. So, I called Washington and asked them what the alternatives were. They said "The University of Southern California at Los Angeles," and someplace in Iowa, if I remember correctly, and a consortium of historically black colleges and universities in North Carolina. I didn't have any particular desire to go to Los Angeles and I certainly didn't want to spend a winter in Iowa or anywhere in the Midwest, having done that once before. So, I opted for North Carolina, which turned out to have been a good choice in a couple of respects, both from the point of view of what I did during the time that I was there, but also because it was relatively close to Washington and allowed me to go back and forth as first the elections took place and then there was a new administration and then the new administration sorted through its chief of mission nominees.

Q: Where did you reside? Could you talk a bit about what you did there?

TOMSETH: This consortium actually was put together with the help of a Foreign Service officer diplomat in residence about 10 years prior to my going down there. The idea was that these schools, none of which had had terribly strong programs in international affairs prior to joining together (In fact, I think some of them didn't have any programs in international affairs.), the idea was that by pooling their resources, the sum of the parts would be greater than the individual participants could bring to the table. The student program had continued to support that consortium over the years. They didn't have a diplomat in residence down there every year, but usually every two or three years they would find somebody to put in.

It consisted of three state schools, one of which was in Greensboro, where I lived, and that was North Carolina NT. Another was Winston Salem State. The third was Central Carolina University in Durham. And there were three private schools, all of them church affiliated. One was St. Augustine's College in Raleigh. Another was a private girls' school in Greensboro. The third was a university in Charlotte, also church affiliated.

So, what I did was park myself in Greensboro and then sort of ride the circuit around to each one of these. Before I went down, I talked to a fellow who had been a USIA officer who had been a diplomat in residence there a couple of years prior. He gave me some good advice, which was that all of these schools were always short on faculty and if I gave one the opportunity to stick me into teaching a class in the regular curriculum, what I would find is that I would be stuck for the most part with that one particular school. His advice was to go around to all six of them and let them know you're there and that you're willing to do things, but don't volunteer to take a particular class. That is, in fact, what I did do. So, during the first semester, I spent a fair amount of time going into other people's classes and talking about various things, much of it having very much to do with my own Foreign Service career and places that I had been. But in the course of that semester, what I discovered was that there was a fair amount of interest in the Foreign Service and how one gets into the Foreign Service. Since part of the Diplomat in Residence Program is as a recruitment tool and particularly in the case of these historically black colleges and universities, I during the course of that first semester came up with an idea which I then discussed with faculty people at these schools, which was to put together a class on how to pass the Foreign Service written examination. I figured if Georgetown University could do it, the North Carolina Consortium in International and Intercultural Education could do it as well. In fact, I went to Georgetown and the Board of Examiners to talk to them about how this might be done. I did that. Then starting the second semester after the holiday break, I did this course. The way it was done was that I still rode the circuit. I went around to each of the schools usually once a week to meet with people who were interested in this and did a tutorial on how you take the written exam in the Foreign Service. Then at the end of the semester with the help of the Board of Examiners, I actually gave them an examination. When they finished doing it, I passed out the key so they could correct their own exam and we went over some of the questions that appeared in it and talked about strategies for how you wold tackle those kinds of questions, with the emphasis being on things that you don't know but you might be able to narrow it down to. If it's a four or five part multiple answer question, if you can narrow that down to two, you're better off guessing at one of the two than you are just leaving it blank. The process for getting into the Foreign Service is so long and drawn out that it's difficult to tell whether anything like that works, but a couple of years later, one of these students from one of these schools, the one in Charlotte, did come into the Foreign Service. He was waiting to be appointed. We had him in Laos as an intern one summer. So, at least one...

Q: What was your impression of school activity and the student body? This was something that was quite alien to them really.

TOMSETH: Well, yes and no. It was alien to me in the sense that I'm not black and alien in the sense that I grew up in the Northwest, not the South. But in a way, there were some aspects of it that were not all that unfamiliar. Most of these young men and women were from relatively small towns and, as in my own case, from very modest economic backgrounds, working class backgrounds. So, in that sense, I had some sense of identity with where they were coming from, at least in terms of the backgrounds that they came out of and their possible interest in foreign affairs, foreign service. But yes, it's good in a sense in that it really gives white America, the majority community in the United States, a sense of what it's like to be a minority.

Q: I always think that there might be a problem for anyone in the United States who doesn't live close to a major newspaper like "The Los Angeles Times," "The New York Times," "The Washington Post" or something. In my travels, I found it was pretty easy to be damn poorly informed anywhere. Did you find this was a problem?

TOMSETH: Yes, to a degree, but again there are new sources available if people will take the trouble to avail themselves of it. Looking at some of these students and comparing them to myself at a comparable age and point in my educational experience, some of them were far better read in terms of international affairs than I was. Growing up, I had read a lot, but it was pretty random. I didn't become a regular reader of (end of tape)

Q: You were saying some of the students...

TOMSETH: Yes. Some of the students were at a comparable stage in their educational experience, were much more sophisticated and more focused in their reading than I was at the same age and stage. I think that's probably a function of what's happened in American society over the last 30 years.

Q: Yes, I think it's very much so.

How did you get along with the faculty and the administration of the schools?

TOMSETH: By and large, very well. There were a couple of people who didn't really care too much for this striped pants white cookie pusher from the Foreign Service being there, but most of the people were very open and very welcoming and didn't really care. They saw me as a resource, not as a representative of a particular racial group.

Q: How did the ambassadorial appointment go?

TOMSETH: Well, not too smoothly. When I got back to Washington in late August of 1992, something that I thought was pretty much a done deal turned out to be not quite done. So, it was up in the air until the elections in November. Then it was back to the drawing board. Very shortly after the election, the Clinton people let it be known that they were going to look at all of the nominations that were left hanging and all of the vacancies that would be coming up when they came into office in early 1993. So, I then went through a period of several months in which I had no idea how this was going to come out. As things turned out, the administration chose Winston Lord as the new assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. While I didn't know Winston all that well (I had met him a few times, but I couldn't say that I was particularly close to him.), probably my best friend in the Foreign Service, Peter Thompson, wound up being his principal deputy. When that happened, then my anxiety level went down quite a bit. But because it was a new administration and it seems like every time there is a new administration, the wheel has to be reinvented, things went very slowly. The administration didn't get around... The first tranche of nominees that were announced, which I was in, was not until the first of July. Then scheduling confirmation hearings with the August recess was a real challenge. As it turned out, I didn't get mine scheduled until after they came back from the August recess. So, it was nearly the end of 1993 by the time I was sworn in and could get out to Laos. I got there in December.

Q: You were in Laos from December 1993 until when?

TOMSETH: Until September 1996, almost three years.

Q: Who was ambassador before you?

TOMSETH: Charlie Samin, who had left in July as he was scheduled to do. Charlie had actually gone out as charge d'affaires in 1975 when the communists took over and did away with the old royal Lao government and abolished the monarchy.We did not close our embassy, although the new regime put a lot of pressure on the embassy and forced AID out, forced the Marine security guards out, forced the military attaches out. In the end, for probably a decade or more, there was a numerical limit on the number of American staff on the embassy and the [number was] sevenot only staff; that was Americans, period. That could be staff, dependents, cats, and dogs, but no more than seven. So, what we had for a long time there was, it was basically a bachelor post. Whether people were married or not, they went unaccompanied. It was only the seven. Charlie had gone out in 1989, I guess, as charge, with the understanding that the then relatively new Bush administration was going to upgrade the position to the ambassadorial level in fairly short order. As it turned out, it took them almost three years to get around to doing that, at which point (Ordinarily it would have been a three year tour.) they agreed that Charlie would stay on an additional year so that he would actually have a decent period not only as charge, but as ambassador as well. That is how that year gap came about. Originally, when this was all under discussion, my objective was to see if I couldn't go there in 1992 when Charlie Samin was originally scheduled to leave. As it turned out, he was there until 1994.

Q: Here is Laos. At one point, you had the President of the United States, John Kennedy, with a map of Laos and a pointer explaining to the American people about the

TOMSETH: The good "grints," the bad "grints," and in between.

Q: This whole thing. Laos has disappeared off the radar of anyone. What were American interests? When you went out to Laos, did you have anything in mind to do?

TOMSETH: Yes. It was quite clear what the agenda was. At the top of the list was accountings for people missing in action for the period of the Vietnam War, of which at the end of the war in 1975, there were about 600 in Laos, most of them lost in aircraft incidents. Laos was the corridor for flights out of the air bases that we used in Thailand to Vietnam. Laos was where the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran from North Vietnam into South, so there was a lot of bombing in Laos itself along the trail and then later on, in Laos, in support of the royal Lao government forces fighting the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese in the northern part of Laos. As I said the other day, when Reagan ran in 1980, one of the issues that was on his agenda was the whole matter of Americans missing in Indochina and including the possibility that some of those people were still alive and still being held prisoner. So, even though the vast majority of Americans had long since forgotten where Laos was, even if they had known, despite John Kennedy, there was a very vocal constituency that at first the Reagan and then the Bush and by this time the Clinton administration were quite conscious of. So, it was not a well known issue, but it was one with a fairly influential constituency in the United States. There were a couple of other things as well that were fairly important again to specific interest groups in the United States. One of those was the final resolution of the Indochinese refugee crisis which had begun in 1975. I mentioned the other day the second Geneva Conference and the program that it adopted whereby there would be a screening process to determine whether or not asylum seekers from Laos and Vietnam actually qualified for refugee status with the presumption that those who didn't would go back from whence they had come. There weren't so many new people coming into the Laos stream, but there were a lot of Laos still in camps in Thailand or the most part, although there were some in China as well, who for whatever reasons had opted not to accept third country resettlement. Neither China nor Thailand were prepared to hold onto those people forever. So, there was a program of repatriating those people to Laos if they didn't want to go to the U.S., Australia, or wherever. At least in the case of the United States, I think in large part because of the feelings of guilt about our having run out on these people in 1973 or 1975, there was a great deal of concern about what their treatment would be like if they were to return to Laos. So, we spent a lot of time and indeed most of the money, the resources, that we had for programs in Laos came because of this concern about returning Lao asylum seekers, for the most part people who did qualify as refugees, but who didn't want third country resettlement.

There was one other thing that was also quite important in terms of the U.S. agenda. That's counternarcotics. Laos was and still is a major opium producer and increasingly was being used as a transit for drugs produced in Burma to move to the international market via a variety of routes.

Q: Could you tell about the government of Laos, their attitude towards us by this time? We're talking about some 20 years after the collapse of America's role in Laos. How did you deal with the government?

TOMSETH: The senior leadership was still very much this group of people who had formed the core of the Pathet Lao all during the 1950s 1970s. I think in the outside world, most people tended to look at Prince Souphanavong as the head of the Pathet Lao, but he was really not the most influential person in the leadership. He was the person that they tended to put out in front because he had a name that was recognized internationally, but the real power in the Pathet Lao was a fellow from Savanaket in central Laos, who was half Vietnamese and half Lao. His name was... He had died a year or so before I got there, but the rest of the people were very much this core group that had spent 20 years in the caves of northern Vietnam and northeastern Laos. They were still very suspicious of the United States. But one of the things that had happened during the 1980s was that the economy had just gone into the tank under the Marxist economic policy that this Pathet Lao regime had tried to implement after it came into power in 1975 and really was being kept afloat by aid from the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. But in 1989, that went away, too. So, the government was faced with a very major problem, Laos never could always, forever, from the time the French were there, never could pay its own way. It always cost the French more than they were able to get out of it to run it. During the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. in effect replaced the French in terms of being the sugar daddy for Laos. Then it was the Russians antheir friends during the 1980s. So, by the end of the 1980s, Laos had to find a new source of aid. That meant loosening up their foreign policy and their domestic economic policies as well. So, that process was fairly well entrained by the time I arrived in 1993. In a way, even though we weren't an aid donor of any significance, that opened the door to some other things. In this process of reaching beyond the socialist bloc for help, it opened the door for us to start working with the Laos on our agenda (POW/MIAs, refugees, and counternarcotics), but because of this attitude at the seniormost levels of the government, it was always very slow going. That was probably just reinforced by the nature of Lao society, which is really... They had a saying: "Step by step." Everything is step by step. Sometimes I thought it was one step forward, one step back, and one step sideways. Progress on these things tended to be fairly slow. But if you were patient and plugged away at it, it was possible to make some headway. I think certainly in the last couple of years that Charlie was there, some fairly significant breakthroughs were made and during the nearly two years that I was there, I think, we pushed the peanut down the road a bit, too.

Q: You want to send a team in to look for remains and something or get a UN vote. Would you go to the foreign ministry as standard contacts rather than somebody you played golf with or sat around and drank gin and tonics with?

TOMSETH: Our principle interlocutor in the government wathey had two vice ministers of foreign affairs, deputies in the foreign ministry. The one that we dealt with was in charge of international organization affairs, their North and South American department, counternarcotics issues. That, in effect, took care of our entire agenda one way or another. He was French educated, one of the very few western educated people who stayed after 1975 and was in a senior position in the government. One of the things during the time that I was there that we worked very hard on was trying not to go around this person, but to expand the points of contact that we had in the government, particularly with the military, the Ministry of Interior, the prime minister's office. Again, as with everything, that was fairly slow going. But I think we were helped in that...

I should back up a step or two. Before I got to Laos, while I was waiting to get through this confirmation process that seemed to be taking forever, in the fall of 1993, I started coming over here to the Foreign Service Institute in the morning and sitting in on the Lao classes to convert the Thai that I already spoke to Lao. The two languages are fairly closely related. I had spoken Thai for a long time. So, I spent the fall of 1993, or at least part of ipart of it, I was up in New Yorgoing through a conversion process. When I got to Laos, I made a point in all of my official contacts of trying to speak Lao with the officials that I dealt with, with great or lesser success. These two languages are close enough together and the penetration of Thai radio and television, at least in Vien Chung, had been so pervasive that in Vien Chung, virtually everybody certainly understands Thai. I would have been able to communicate in Thai even if I hadn't tried to make that conversion to Lao. But there was a certain rivalry between Thailand and Laos that in recent decades has also been a political rivalry. I just thought it would be more politic to at least make an attempt to speak Lao. But doing that turned out to be a great advantage in terms of access to some of these hardline communist senior leaders in the regime. The prime minister is a good example. This was a fellow who had been the commander of the army for a long, long time. While I was still in Bangkok, he had become prime minister. I remember seeing cables out of Vien Chung about how anti western this person was. For a long time, he would not receive any of the heads of the western missions in Laos. Then when he did, they tended to be very perfunctory meetings. So, when I arrived and had presented my credentials and went to call on him, I went alone. He had an interpreter there, but when we sat down and we started this conversation, initially, it was very much diplomatic boiler plate on his side and then I would respond and wouldn't give hi interpreter a chance to convert that into English. I would respond in Lao. After five or six minutes of this, a great big smile lit up his face and he said like a light had come on, "You can speak Lao, can't you?" Then we had a fairly good conversation for the remainder of the time I was there.

A couple of months after that, the Australians had built a bridge across the Mekong between Thailand and Laos near Pien Jun and that was opened up in April of 1994. Everybodthe diplomatic corps, all sorts of peoplwere invited to this and they had a joint [ceremony] with the Thais and the Laos to do this. While we were standing around waiting to be seated before the ceremony, people were mingling on the bridge. I encountered the prime minister and he immediately grabbed hold of his wife and said, "Talk to this guy! He can speak our language!" So, the ability to do that, even though the Thai antecedents obviously crept in from time to time, made a big difference in terms of the barrier that ordinarily we had to get over to have any kind of contact with some of these senior leaders. I don't suggest that it went away. It did not. But at least it was lowered somewhat in terms of being able to gain access and to have some communications.

Q: Your main priority was missing in action. How did that go while you were there?

TOMSETH: By the time I had gotten there, we had made enough progress in our working relations with the Laos and with the Vietnamese for that matter to have put in place permanent detachments of the Joint Task Force operating out of Hawaii responsible for accounting. So, we had four active duty military people assigned to this detachment in the embassy in Vien Chung, full time. They were there year round. They worked principally with the Lao Ministry of Defense in developing plans for trying to search out crash sites for the most part and then mounting archeological digs. A team of 30 40 people would come in to the crash sites which had been identified and dig them up just like an archeological dig looking for remains or any other evidence of what happened to the individual or individuals involved in these crashes. By the time I left, this had become so much of a routine that the planning went on year round, but teams were coming in every other month and spending a month at a crash site. Indeed, on several occasions, we had multiple teams in so that they were doing two or three crash sites at a time. Part of that was gathering information. That included archives. Lao are unlike the Vietnamese, who are basically Sinitic in their culture and keep meticulous records. The Lao never were great record keepers. Even if they did write something down and put it somewhere, within a fairly short period of time, they probably forgot what was in it and they also forgot where they put it. So, tracking down records was an arduous task. Again, I mentioned several times before this industry that developed to meet the demand for live American prisoners in Indochina was very much at work. We would get people walking in saying that they knew of people or they knew somebody who knew of people who were being held. All of that had to be tracked down. We endeavored to do that in cooperation with the Lao authorities, although there was a clandestine aspect to it as well of gathering information in various ways and trying to get some fix on how good the information was before we might then take that to the Laos to go into the area where So and So allegedly was sighted.

Q: By this time, we're talking about the early 1990s, some 2years after the last ordinance. Had there ever been a credible finding of an American alive?

TOMSETH: No. The only American that came out of Indochina after 1973 was a Marine enlisted man named Garwood, who voluntarily stayed behind. That was known in 1973. In the late 1970s, he decided that he wanted to come home after all and is now in the United States. He is the only one. No. Most of this work really has been done since 1981. There was relatively little done in the period from 1973 1981. But in all of that time, there has been no solid evidence produced to suggest that any American who was or may still be alive was or is still being held in Indochina.

Q: Were the American adventurers allowed? Could they get inside? Were they a problem for you?

TOMSETH: Well, two or three times, some of the less well known ones managed to get a visa into Laos, but those were fairly rare happenings. The Laos knew most of the more notorious ones. For an American to get a visa, certainly during the entire period I was there, you had to apply at a post overseas and then that post had to send the information back to the ministry of foreign affairs for a coordinated approval within the Lao government. That allowed them to pretty much keep the more notorious of these soldiers of fortune out of Laos. But they were much more frequently in Thailand. Thailand is a lot easier to get into and the environment is in some respects more friendly as well. So, the activities of these people in Thailand would sometimes cause a certain amount of angst in Laos.

Q: What about old timers? We had been there a long time. They were devoted friends and wives or consorts, children, the whole thing. Was that a burden on you at all?

TOMSETH: Unlike Vietnam, if children were left behind, they were taken into Lao society and that was the end of it. But the numbers in Laos were never what they were in Vietnam, so the numbers of children simply weren't anywhere near as great. But certainly by the time I got there, you had a phenomenon of people who had served in Laonot just the AID peoplAir America and servicepeople, too. Maybe they hadn't been in Laos, but they had certainly flown over Laos. They started coming back on nostalgia trips. It became possible while I was there to cross into Laos at Whosi, which is on the Mekong River. You could get on the Mekong and come down the Mekong to Vientiane, stopping at various places along the way, including Rulupuban, the old royal capital. A group of 10 12 of these people made that trip. It was sort of a nostalgia trip for them. We had a fair number of military and Air America people who also came back on nostalgia trips.

Q: What about drugs?

TOMSETH: One of the projects that we had while I was there was to actually get a DEA person assigned to the embassy in Vientiane. That did not happen while I was there. It has now. There is a DEA person there. But DEA had an office in Udorn in northeastern Thailand and we were able to work out an arrangement where that DEA person would come over every couple of weeks or so to do liaison work with his Lao counterparts. We also had a State Department "Bureau of Drugs and Thugs" person in the embassy. The program was basically aimed at two things. One was the Lao opium crop. That was basically the State Department component of it. We had a budget to do a crop substitution program in northeastern Laos in Whoupon Province. Our State Department person basically ran that program. Also some things with Lao customs and a little bit with the police, although that was more a DEA function. DEA worked with the Lao police. During the time I was there, we were actually able to get the Laos to establish a special counternarcotics unit in the police force to focus on this. DEA helped with the training. The State Department put up some money equip an office for them and buy them some vehicles. Their objective was to try to disrupt trafficking operations through Laos and, when we could find evidence of refinery operations in Laos, to track that down and shut down the refineries.

Q: I would have thought that getting evidence and all would be very difficult. Here is a regime which is obviously suspicious of American activities and even though this is not of a military nature, it's still intelligence is intelligence. It means informants and that whole thing.

TOMSETH: Well, the major purpose of the office in Udorn was to collect intelligence on what was happening in Laos. DEA had/has (They still have the office in Udorn.) a string of informants providing them with "information" on what was going on in Laos. One of the big problems was that a lot of these informants were people associated with the old regime and their reliability was always suspect. CIA had stopped collecting intelligence on Laos by the early 1990s, so there really was very little information available on what was happening, most of it via these DEA sources whose reliability was in some doubt. The other major source of intelligence, but it didn't do much good in terms of trafficking, was satellite imagery. That was okay for the opium [crop] and we were quite open about that. We would share the information that we got from that with the Laos as part of our effort in the crop substitution program.

Q: You mentioned missing in action. Refugees... How did that work?

TOMSETH: Not bad. This was really a quadrilateral effort. The main triangle were the governments of Laos and Thailand and UNHCR, but because the U.S. had a special interest in these Lao islanderin particular, we were very much involved in it. We put some money into projects to assist the reintegration of people who actually came back. The biggest problems really were the asylees themselves. If allowed to have their druthers, they would have just as soon have stayed in these UNHCR administered camps in Thailand. I remember going to one of these things in the 1980s when I was on the Thai/Burma desk. There was a State Department person along with me. We went to this one at Bangquini, which was in Loui Province west of Vientiane, but on the Thai side of the border. It's a very remote area of Thailand. "Bur" in Thai actually means "beyond." Beyond the beyond.

Do we have time for a funny story?

Q: Yes.

TOMSETH: When I was in Thailand the first time in the late 1960s, Bangkok had a mayor who was notoriously corrupt. The mayor was then appointed, not elected. Finally, things got so bad that the government knew that it had to get Chun Nan Uaboon not only out of that position, but out of the country. So, like Chai Chai Chunawan, whom I spoke of the other day, the government sent Chun Nan out to Argentina as ambassador. In one of the Thai language papers, somebody wrote a letter to the editoobviously an older person. The letter said, "I find it absolutely scandalous that the government would appoint a notorious crook like Chung Nan Uaboon to a prestigious position such as the Thai ambassador to Argentina. In my day, the government never would have done that. They would have made Chung Nan the governor of Loui Province and really punished him." We went to this camp at Banwinai in Loui Province and this person that was along with me after we toured around said, "My god, how can people possible live in these conditions?" It was sort of like a great Lao island village, but it had 40,000 people in it. But the conditions were pretty primitive. I said, "Well, from their point of view, it's probably no worse than living on a mountaintop in Laos and the good news is that UNHCR delivers the chickens every Thursday." So, there were understandable reasons why many of these people really would have preferred to stay forever in these refugee camps. But in this program to wind down the whole Indochinese refugee problem, the government of Thailand, the government of Laos, and UNHCR were the principal actors in moving people back to Laos if they weren't going to be resettled in a third country. But we involved ourselves in that process very closely and put some resources into helping ease the transition for people coming back. But in addition to the reluctance of people to come back, the problem for the Lao government was to find places where they could go. It wasn't an issue of just taking an individual or even a family or maybe two or three families and saying, "Here is your 10 acres. Do with it what you will." These people wanted to be resettled in villages. They have a very strong clan structure. Finding enough land that was suitable for agriculture to support a whole village was a real challenge for the Lao government.

Q: Did they come from a place and was that place empty before and they just go back to where they came from?

TOMSETH: No. Almost none of them went back to where they had originally come from for a couple of reasons. One was that these were highlanders for the most part. The Lao government had a policy of encouraging stabilization of agriculture. These highlanders practiced slash and burn agriculture. They cut down the forest, farmed a few years until the soil was a dust, and then move on to someplace else. The Lao government, like a lot of governments in Southeast Asia, was really trying to stabilize that population. So, they wanted to put them somewhere where they would be able to farm the land permanently.

Additionally, the people themselves usually didn't want to go back to where they had been. Those areas, while economically they were marginal, in security terms they might not be safe either. There was and is a resistance movement that operates in remote area(end of tape)

These returning asylees were afraid that they would be identified by the resistance as traitors just by virtue of having agreed to come back to Laos and be resettled. So, they wanted to be in areas that were reasonably secure.

Q: How about the Laotian government? What was your feeling about refugees, your dealing with them?

TOMSETH: In the circumstances, I think the Lao government was surprisingly willing to take these people back and to do so in conditions where the people really had as much freedom as anyone else in Laos. They were issued an identity card and they could move about as easily as anyone else. Also, the resources are always a problem for the Lao government. They don't have a lot. But to the extent that there were government resources available for public programs, whether that was in health or education, they made a fair share of that available to people returning. They would set up a school in each of these returnee villages, for example.

Q: By this time, people coming back, what was the attitude of the people, particularly the officials? Did you feel there would be retribution?

TOMSETH: No. That is why I say they were surprisingly open. It would have been fairly easy to... Not necessarily retribution. A lot of these people were just family members of people who might havand some of them rather distant family memberbeen involved in the war. But I certainly could have understood the regime being very suspicious of where their loyalties were. I think there is some question about where their loyalties were. But that usually did not manifest itself. Certainly at the local level, the local officials tended to be quite good about doing everything they could to reintegrate these people into local society. I think from the local point of view, there was a reason for that. That was that if you can get a population settled there, that means that you get a little more from the central government in terms of resources that it provides. Also, in a number of areas where these people were resettled, the only land that could be identified that was large enough to resettle a whole village often was forested land. That had to be cut down in order to turn it into farmland. There was revenue to be made from the timber that was harvested on that land. So, that was an incentive for local authorities to want to have these people.

Q: During this time, 1993 1996, what was your impression of the writ of the Lao government? In South Vietnam, it was really a takeover by North Vietnamese communists and there were reeducation camps and everything else. They're still kind of working their way out from under that. What about in Laos?

TOMSETH: Laos is a country of very rugged terrain with a very underdeveloped transportation infrastructure. There are very few decent roads in Laos. I was able to get all over the place thanks to the Joint Task Force accounting operations and the counternarcotics program that we had. That meant I could travel by helicopter. Other than that, it is very difficult to get about. The theory of administration in Laos was typically communist top down directives. But the reality on the ground because of the poor transportation infrastructure and poor telecommunications as well was that local authorities tended thave a great deal of authority in many areas, not so great that they could deviate from basic party doctrine and dogma, but certainly in the day to day administration of their areas of responsibility, they had a great deal of authority. It's not surprising that provincial governors almost without exception were members of the Central Committee. One of the things that surprised me a bit was that the provincial governors tended to be people from that area and many of them tended to be ex teachers. So, by and large, the provincial governors I found fairly easy to deal with. They were a little different than the typical Party apparatchiks in Vientiane. They tended to be very pragmatic in terms of they saw fairly clearly what their agenda was. It was really a development/education focused agenda at the provincial level. They were not doctrinaire at all in terms of finding solutions to the practical problems that they had to deal with in the context of their local agenda.

Q: When the Pathet Lao had taken over, what did they do with their opponents?

TOMSETH: They managed to scare most of them out of the country even before they took power. As soon as they did, most of the rest left the country. You wound up with certainly at least 10% of the population fleeing. Of that 10%, that was the vast majority of the educated elite in Lao society, needless to say. A few did not. They were sent off to reeducation camps. Most of them were told, "Well, you're going to have to go off and go to seminars for a few weeks." Most of them didn't stay that long. Typically, it was a few months, six months maybe. After the first six months, the majority of those people who went to reeducation were allowed to go home. But there were a few. These tended to be people who were officers in the military or mid level functionaries in the government who wound up staying for years and years. I think the last of the people originally sent to reeducation were not released until about 1989. So, they had been there 14 years. Interestingly, a few of thosthere was one fellow in particular in the Ministry of Justice who was released in 1989. In the meantime, his wife and his children had all fled to Thailand and had been resettled in the United States. He was from Savanaket in central Laos. When he was released, he found out that his wife and children were all gone. He was able to get in touch with them through family, but they weren't terribly interested in reestablishing the family. So, he went back down to Savanaket. He was not a young man. He was well into his 50s by that point. He remarried and was sort of prepared to live out the rest of his years in retirement as it were in Savanaket with a new wife, but a few months after he was released, the government got in touch with him and said, "Would you come to Vientiane and serve as an advisor in the Ministry of Justice for a few months anyway? We really need to avail ourselves of your expertise." So, he did that. Then they told him after a few months, "Would you stay a few months more?" Finally, they said, "Would you stay on as the senior civil servant in the Ministry of Justice?" This didn't happen often, but there were enough of these really strange cases that made you wonder. But when he was released, he didn't feel anl think probably because the signals from his family in the United States were that his wife really wasn't interested in getting back togethehe didn't want to leave Laos. He stayed in Laos and then he was called back by the regime.

A few, of course... The King was the most notable example. When the monarchy was abolished, he, like Prince Souvanna Phouma, was made an advisor to the new regime, but within a year the King and the Queen and the Crown Prince were sent off to reeducation and they never came back.

Q: During this time, were we looking towards doing more than running our show? Were we looking towards assistance and this sort of thing?

TOMSETH: We were providing some assistance, very targeted, through the counternarcotics program, through the refugee return operation, and in the context of the POW/MIA operation... That actually was fairly interesting in that we would take advantage of resources within the military, the need to do training, for example, to have teams come out to Laos and build schoolhouses, for example. Then while I was there, one of the issues that I became particulary interested in was unexploded ordinance, of which Laos was the most heavily bombed country in the history of warfare. Far more tonnage was dropped on Laos than was dropped on all of Europe during World War II. A lot of it didn't go off. There were lots of land battles in Laos between the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese on one side and the Royal Lao government forces on the other supported by the U.S. So, this stuff was all over the place. By the early 1990s, there had been far more people killed and injured by unexploded ordinance since 1973 than had been killed in the period 1962 1973 when the bombing was going on. This was a development issue as well. There were large parts of Laos that basically were off limits in terms of agriculture because of unexploded ordinance. So, in the context of the POW/MIA operation, we began to look at this issue of unexploded ordinance. The whole basis for cooperation was that there was no explicit quid pro quo, but in exchange for their helping us with an issue that was high on our agenda, we would try to do what we could to help them with priority areas on their agenda. Development was obviously at the top. So, we began to look at this issue of unexploded ordinance and what we might be able to do.

As it turned out, because we had to do this through the U.S. militaressentially, that was the only avenue available to us in terms of finding resourcethere was a great deal of reluctance on the Lao side to let us get... It's one thing to bring in an engineering detachment and build a few schools in a month. It's another thing to bring in special forces and Marines to run an unexploded ordinance program on an open ended basis. But the UN also got involved in this from the development point of view. The senior UN person there was the head of the UN Development Program and an old friend of mine. We had been in Sri Lanka together. So, he felt that unless... What he was trying to do was to organize an international consortium to fund a major unexploded ordinance program in Laos. But he felt that if the United States were not part of that, it would be very difficult to get much enthusiasm from other potential donors. So, he was very anxious to have us in it. My position was, 'We'd like to be in it, but we're not making much progress bilaterally. If we can get under the UN umbrella, that might allow us to do it.' That's exactly what happened. With the UN pushing on the political front, we were able to piggyback on that effort to get a U.S. component in this unexploded ordinance prograactually, the single largest component in it using U.S. military and resources available through the Department of Defense. That actually got started a few months before I left in 1996 and has gone very well since then. In fact, Jan Matsen, who was then the head of the UNDP in Laos and now is in New York and was visiting a few weeks ago. He said that the UN administered trust fund actually has more money in it than it can spend, that the real constraint is local resources, principally personnel that the Laos can put into the program. So, that was one of the things we were able to do.

Q: During the time you were there, I think there was a big effort on the part of the UN in Cambodia to have fair elections and all. They did try something. Did what was happening in Cambodia spill over to either the Khmer Rouge or the Vietnamese government? Did that have any effect?

TOMSETH: No, not very much. The elections were in May of 1993 and they formed a government during that summer. By that point, the Khmer Rouge really was not much of a factor in Cambodia anymore. It was breaking up into factions. They operated in a few places along the Cambodian Thai border, but in the tri border area where Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand come together, which in the 1980s, there was a lot of fighting that involved Thailand and the various factions in Cambodia and the Vietnamese (not so much the Laos. They just sort of got out of the way.) in that tri border area. But by the 1990s, that really wasn't happening anymore. In a political sense, there wasn't much apparent impact of what had happened in Cambodia in Laos, although I am sure that it probably caused some anxiety among the leadership. Here, after all, was a country that had been part of the socialist bloc, that had become a monarchy once again. While there was never a Lao equivalent of Prince Sihanouk and the Lao family never was the same kind of political factor in Laos that Sihanouk was in Cambodia, I'm sure that some of these guys must have been a little bit uneasy by what had happened in Cambodia. But the immediate practical effect in Laos was negligible.

Q: What about the writ of Vietnam?

TOMSETH: In the 1970s and 1980s, the Vietnamese presence in Laos was overwhelming. They had 40 60,000 military forces at any given moment and advisors in every ministry. In fact, the fellow who was the Vietnamese ambassador while I was in Vientiane (He is still there, as a matter of fact. He is now dean he's been there so long.) had started out in Laos as a Vietnamese advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then had gone away briefly and then had come back to their embassy as their deputy chief of mission and then had gone away again and then had come back as their ambassador. He spoke very good Lao.

Another digression, if I may, about the utility of learning a language. Of the diplomatic corps, he and I were the only ones who spoke Lao. They had a party congress while I was there in the spring of 1996. By that time, traveling around the country on POW/MIA and refugee things, I had become fairly well known to what passes for the Lao press corps. In fact, we through a USIA program were trying to help them a bit in improving their professional standards. When this congress was over, the diplomatic corps was invited to attend some of the sessions, including the closing session. At the closing session, the Lao press corps wanted to interview some of the diplomats about the congress. The only two that they could interview because you had to speak Lao were the Vietnamese ambassador and me. So, here we were, this one time patron of Laos, the representative thereof, and the representative of what had at one time been the great enemy of their regime standing there side by side commenting on the results of the Lao communist party congress.

In any event, by the 1990s, the Vietnamese influence had diminished very considerably in real terms as far as what was happening in Laos. They had neither resources nor expertise that seemed terribly relevant. They still came and went all the time. The seniors were always running off to Vietnam. There were always senior Vietnamese coming. At the time, it seemed almost farcical in terms of the importance of this to anything meaningful that was actually happening in Laos. The Thai government in many respects had much more influence than the Vietnamese government. Thailand was the single largest foreign investor by far in Laos and it was Thai investors that were really driving the economy at that point. I am told by my successor, Wendy Chamberlin, who just finished up her tour, that with the Asian financial crisis, the Vietnamese have made a bit of a comeback in Laos. The Lao economy was hurt by this, being as dependent as it was on the Thai economy. The Vietnamese have been able to make something of a comeback, in effect, by telling the Laos, "We told you so."

Q: I take it that from what you were saying your embassy was no longer under the seven American restriction.

TOMSETH: No. By the time I got there, I think we were up to 15 or 16 American staff and we added a couple more while I was there. They've added a couple more since then. But it's still not a big embassy. Actually, it was in many respects a very good post. We had work that kept everybody busy and some of these issues had their constituencies in the United States, so people working on them could feel that they were involved in something that was important, at least to those constituencies. But it was not like some places where I've been where the only life that people assigned in the embassy had was their work. People actually had a life. It really had transformed from being a bachelor post to a very nice family post. In fact, when I was in Croatia last year, the consular officer in the embassy in Zagreb told me that in the last bidding cycle go around, he had tried to get Laos, but there was a lot of competition for it.

Q: What was Vientiane like during this time? I've heard that before it had all the aspects of a "Wild West" town. This was from Dick Howland and others who spent quite a bit of time there during the early 1970s.

TOMSETH: When I was a vice consul in Udorn in 1968 and 1969, I lived with a USIA officer. We were both bachelors at the time. We would go up to Vientiane on the weekend fairly frequently. It wasn't very far away. We would go up there because at that time Udorn had been a little northeastern Thai provincial town and was a lot of unpaved streets and red dust and a great big air base right on the edge of town, but really it was a seedy little backwater. Vientiane was seedy, too, but at least it had an air of cosmopolitan quality that Udorn couldn't begin to match. It also had a nightlife that was about as raunchy as anyplace in Southeast Asia, I suppose. When we were in Bangkoit must have been about 199my wife and I went up to visit Charlie in Vientiane. It was the first time I had been there in 20 years. Other than the fact that the cars were somewhat newer models, it looked to me like Vientiane hadn't changed a bit in those 20 years. We were there about three days, I think. Wandering around the market, I was talking to some of the people, I said, "I was here in the late 1960s and early 1970s and it looks to me like nothing has changed." They said, "Oh, a lot has changed. After 1975, it really got bad. In the last few years, we've managed to claw our way back to where we were." But in the meantime, Udorn had become a thriving metropolitan area, sort of the major economic center for the upper part of northeastern Thailand. These days, the big city is Udorn. If you want Kentucky Fried Chicken and the Thai equivalent of the Price Club, that's where you go. Vientiane is just as sleepy as it ever was.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about about this time?

TOMSETH: I think that probably covers most of the issues in Laos while I was there. It was a good post.

Q: You left there in 1996. Whither?

TOMSETH: I came back to Washington and retired from the Foreign Service. My ambitiol knew I was going to do this even before I went to Laowas to go back to Oregon where I grew up, plant some land, plant some grapes, and try to make some wine. This is an industry that when I was a kid, the conventional wisdom in the Lelamet Valley was that the climate was too cool for wine grapes. You had to go to California for that. But in the late 1960s, after I had left, a few people figured out that the Lelamet Valley is on the same parallel as Burgundy and the climate is quite similar. The winters probably aren't quite as cold as Burgundy, but the summers are very similar. They started planting typical Burgundian grapePinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay. In fairly short order, they started making not a lot, but really world class (particularly Pinot Noir, the Burgundy red wine) wines that were excellent. So, back in the 1980s after a family reunion in which my brother and brother in law and I went around and tour a number of these wineries that had sprung up in the Lelamet Valley, I decided, "When I grow up, that's what I want to do." Unfortunately, we had a house in Vienna, Virginia, and the relevant provision of law at that time was that if you wanted to sell your principal residence and take a one time $125,000 capital gains exclusion, you had to live in that house three out of the five years prior to sale. We had not lived in the house since 1989 when we went to Thailand. So, to get that advantage, we needed to move back into this house. No sooner were we back in the house than my wife said, "You can move to Oregon if you want. I'm never moving again." Then they changed the law. So, for the timebeing, I think we're stuck here. I'm not sure whether I'll ever get to grow grapes.

Q: She wasn't up to getting her feet wine soaked stomping around in a vat of grapes.

TOMSETH: This is a Bangkok girl who likes to tell people she doesn't do dirt.

Q: I'd like to cover this time you were in Croatia. Could you talk about what you did and the period of time you were in Croatia?

TOMSETH: Yes. After I got back here and retired, I serendipitously wound up doing some work for Booz, Allen and Hamilton, one of these consulting firms.

Q: Basically a management accounting type firm.

TOMSETH: Well, they do all sorts of things. As it turns out, one of the things they do is a contract with the Department of Defense to help with military exercise planning and training. That's what I was doing, helping them with this contract, particularly for the Pacific Command in Hawaii.

But then at the holidays in 1997, I got a call from a friend who was then the deputy to Bob Gelbart, who was the special representative for Dayton Peace Accord implementation. He asked me if I would be willing to come in and talk to Bob about a job in Croatia. I said, "Yes, of course, but why in God's name are you calling me?" I had spent my entire career in Asia. In fact, I like to tell people the furthest west I ever got was Teheran, and that was starting on the other side. In any event, right after New Year, I went in and talked to Gelbart. As it turned out, he had a couple of reasons. The job actually was to be the deputy head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation mission in Croatia. What they were doing at that point was going from a mission of about 10 or 12 international staff to one that was nearly 400 by the time I left at the end of March of this year. When they called, I didn't even know there was an OSC. I thought of the International Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), but what I found out was that a few years ago, in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and what happened in Yugoslavia and the Eastern Bloc, the members had decided that they would become an organization and create a permanent secretariat, although they didn't want to repeat the mistakes of the UN. They didn't want another New York. So, the secretariat is actually quite small. But they began putting together missions, for the most part in former republics of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, to help them out with various transition issues. But with Dayton, the OSCE took on a major responsibility for implementation of the peace accord, particularly running the elections in Bosnia. But because it had so little experience in running big missions, the Bosnian operation had had a lot of hiccups, you might say. As they contemplated creating a second large mission in Croatia, the U.S. at least wanted somebody who actually had some experience in management in a big mission. Since I had been DCM in Bangkok, that was one of the reasons that Gelbart had thought of me.

The other one though was that Gelbart himself is basically a Latin Americanist. He told me that in Croatia, some of the issues that the mission would deal with would be refugee return and conflict resolution. He had been in that job about six months at that point. One of the things he had discovered was that, the Cold War notwithstanding, from 1949 1989 at least, Europe had basically been at peace. The consequence of that for the European Bureau was that they had relatively few people who had hands on experience dealing with refugee issues, dealing with conflict resolution, dealing with wars. So, he had found out very quickly in finding Americans to put into these OSCE missions, he'd be a lot better off looking for Latin American, African, and Asian hands than he would EUR hands. As it turned out, I think he was basically correct on both scores. The senior deputy head of the OSCE mission in Croatia; we had another deputy, a German diplomat who was the other deputy... But the job I had was essentially very similar to being the DCM in Bangkok. It was very heavy on the management side, although there was a fair amount of substance, particularly on refugee issues. Again, the head of the UNHCR in Croatia was an American named Rob Robinson who had been the UNHCR person in Banwinai, this came in Loui Province in Thailand in the late 1980s when I was country director for Thailand.

Q: You were there from when to when?

TOMSETH: I got there February 1, 1998 and left at the end of March this year. It was basically an unaccompanied tour. I told Bob at the outset, "I'm staying a year, but probably not much longer than that." Even before the year was up, I really knew that I wasn't going to stay much longer than that, although I had told him I'd stay long enough to find a replacement.

Q: What was the situation in Croatia at that time and what were you doing?

TOMSETH: When I got there, we had about 170 international staff, a couple of hundred nationals, in a headquarters operation in Zagreb, and four regional centers, each of which had from four to six field offices all over Croatia, but heavily concentrated in eastern Slovenia, the part of Croatia that was still occupied by Serb military forces at the time Dayton was signed at the end of 1995 and which the UN had taken over for two years beginning in January of 1996. Dayton was in December of 1995. The UN actually administered that territory. They were the government in eastern Slovenia for two years. That includes Vukowar and Oseec.

Q: Those were two major combat areas.

TOMSETH: Oseec was shelled, but it was actually just outside the area controlled by the Serbs, although most of the province, the Zhupan, of which Oseec is the capital, was controlled by the Serbs. So, the UN didn't administer the town of Oseec, but it did administer a large part of the province. One of the reasons the decision was made to build up the OSCE mission had to do with the limited mandate that the UN had. It was two years and no more. The UN also had a police monitoring force there. It was expected that the OSC would take that over. Originally, the idea was that the OSC would take it over when the UN mandate ran out in January of 1996, but the OSC was not able to gear up quick enough to do that. So, the UN police monitoring operation was actually extended by nine months to give us time to do that. When I arrived, that was the first thing that I was put in charge of: figuring out (because the OSC had never done anything like this) how we were going to create a police force, in effect, that would work side by side with the Croatian police. This was not something that the government of Croatia was very enthusiastic about at all. One of the things that I'm proudest of of the time that I spent in Croatia was our ability to mount this operation and to do so very successfully. It really is a model for the future for the OSCE. Even though it is the UN in Kosovo that is going to be responsible for it, to get that started, they actually drew upon the organization that we had created in Croatia to set up their monitoring operation in Kosovo.

Q: After all, here is a slice of territory, Slovenia, which was considered part of Croatia, wasn't it? Whey were we still messing around there, doing something there, instead of saying to the Croats, "Here you are?"

TOMSETH: Because in that area and various other parts of Croatia as well, prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia, there were large numbers of Serbs who had lived there for generations in these areas. What the international community, whether you're speaking of the UN or the OSCE membership, simply was not prepared to give that to the Croatian government and let them do what they would with the remaining Serb population. At the time Dayton was signed, one of the guarantees was that people who had lived in an area, whether in Bosnia or Croatia, traditionally would have the right to remain theror if they had been forced out during the period of conflict would have the right to go back. The view was that without some kind of international presence there, not only would people who had fled be unable to come back, people who had remained would soon be forced out.

The idea is people, particularly in late 20th century Europe, and Croatia in particular, but I think the Balkan states, including the Yugoslav successor states, with very few exceptions, want to be part of modern Europe. Croatians think they're already fully qualified and should be brought into the European Union immediately. The idea that in a modern late 20th centursoon to be 21st centurEurope you have states based overwhelmingly on ethnic principles is unacceptable, even though, if you look around Western Europe, these are states that tended to be created on the basis of nationality. Virtually all of them have ethnic minorities of one sort or another who to a greater or lesser degree have been fairly well integrated into those societies. The whole nature of the European Union itself is going in the opposite direction, the notion that anyone who is a citizen of a component of the Union is free to go and live and work wherever within that union flies in the face of the principle that the leadership in some of the Yugoslav successor states seem bent on pursuing. So, the underlying principle in Dayton that people should be able to remain where they have lived for generations or to go back to where they and their ancestors had lived for generations seems logical enough. But the reality of Balkan history is impossible to escape when you're on the ground there. When I was in Iran, there was a fellow in the Drug Enforcement Agency operation there who was born in Yugoslavia, Pete Denich, who became a very good friend. I have no idea whether Pete is a Croat or a Serb. I presume he's not a Bosniac because he has a Christian name. But he could be anything. What difference does it make to an American? But, boy, it makes every difference to those people. The intensity of feeling on the part of Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians (There weren't very many Albanians in Croatia.) in terms of their confessioit's really more confessional than anything elsidentity, although they're busily creating linguistic differences as one as theis almost incomprehensible to an American. I think it would have been incomprehensible if I had not already seen it in Sri Lanka.

Q: I don't know how you felt at the time, but I'm an old Balkan hand (I spent five years in Belgrade.). I see what's happening in Kosovo, where we've got just what you said, the whole idea that you have to allow people to live where they were before and all that, in Kosovo, we're now dealing with the idea of, well, we're insisting that Serbs and Kosovars are going to live together, even though particularly the Serbs really have done a terrible thing to the Kosovars just months before, you get caught in this ideology, which is, this is the way it should be and you're going to do it this way up against people who have been working in this thing for centuries. Did you feel you were up against that? Essentially, it's your ideology that is wrong in the situation.

TOMSETH: Exactly. It's just as you describe. In this case, you have represented by the OSC mission in Croatia a determination to enforce a principle that simply isn't accepted by the vast majority of Croats. In fact, I don't think it's accepted by the Serb community either, particularly in eastern Slovenia, where they did live under this administration of the Republic of Kryena from 1991 the end of 1995. Even though there still are a significant number of Serbs who are there, a lot of them during the 14 months I was there left for Yugoslavia or went to Yugoslavia. They would get their Croatian passport and then go to Yugoslavia and then get on a plane and go to Norway or someplace like that. A lot of those people simply wouldn't accept the notion that if they were going to stay in Croatia, they would be a minority community in a state dominated by Croats. They couldn't accept that.

Q: Also, from what I gather, right now, the big devil is Milosevic in Serbia, but Franjo Tudjman, the head of Croatia, is probably more of a racist than Milosevic, who seems to be more an opportunist. From what I gather, the Tudjman government is not a nice benevolent government wanting to embrace all peoples.

TOMSETH: No. I'm not in a position to make comparisons. I'm not sure I could say that Tudjman is more of a racist than Milosevic, but he certainly is a Croat chauvinist. There is no doubt about that. He is not a democrat either. His commitment to democratic principles is tenuous at best. There will be parliamentary elections either late this year or early next at the latest. As things now stand, it does not seem likely that Tudjman's party will be able to do even what it currently has, which is a plurality in the national assembly. It doesn't have the majority. But the opposition there is so fragmented that it's certainly not inconceivable that what you'll wind up with is a coalition of Tudjman's party and some others still forming the government there. If I had to guess, I don't think the odds are likely that he or his party or the military would intervene in any way to upset the results of that election. I think the odds are that they will play by those parliamentary rules, although Tudjman's party even before I left was doing everything it could to make sure that it has every possible advantage. Their control of the media, the electronic media particularly, is a major tool in that regard.

Q: How did the OSC work with the Croatian government during this time?

TOMSETH: The head of the mission was a Swiss diplomat who, in a way, is a lot like Dan O'Donohue. He has tremendous political instincts and is always thinking at least a couple of steps ahead in the political game. He just drove the Croatians nuts because he was so much cleverer than most of them. In a number of respects, I think he was fairly effective during his tenure there. He got there in September of 1997 and then left at the end of May of this year. But he had pretty much run out the string by the time he left. He had so irritated the Croatians that it was becoming very difficult to accomplish much. The reaction of the government to almost anything that Tim Goldman, the fellow... Anything that Tim proposed was viscerally negative. This was before I left, but in the expectation that Tim would be going sometime in the first half of this year, the Croatian government actually approached the American embassy and asked them if it would be possible if I could be Tim's successor. Bill Montgomery, who is our ambassador in Zagreb, asked me if I would be willing to do this. My reaction was "Bill, you've got to be realistic. The OSCE only has three large missions. By that time, they had created a mission in Kosovo.) The head of the Bosnian mission is an American. The head of the Kosovo mission is an American. There is no way the Europeans are going to stand to have an American as the head of the third large mission." Tim's replacement is a French diplomat, which makes sense in terms of the organization.

Q: In this, you've got the Slovenia thing, but were there any Serbs left in the Kryenis it still called that?

TOMSETH: Not by the Croats.

Q: No. But basically, it's that southern strip where the Serbs have set up their own republic and then it went down at the very end of the offensive by the Croatians. It was taken over. Lots of Serbs left and ended up in Banja Luka in that area. What about residue? Were you dealing with those things?

TOMSETH: Oh, yes, very much so. A few stayed, particularly where Croatia makes this arc that the border with Bosnia runs east and west in the northern part and then more or less north and south in the southern part inland from the Dalmatian Coast. That northern part is a fairly fertile area. It was an area of small farms. More people tended to stay in that area than in the southern part that is centered on Keneen. That area's major export for years and years is people because it's such poor quality agricultural land. That area is essentially empty. A few Bosnian Croats, particularly in Keneen, which used to be an overwhelmingly Serb town, is now overwhelmingly Croat. Most of those are Bosnian Croats. But there are still a few Serbs left. One of the things that the mission worked on, particularly in cooperation with UNHCR, was to see if the Serbs who fled that area would come back. But there were a couple of problems with it. One is, the willingness of the Croats who were in the area to let them come back. Secondly, what did they do when they got there? There were a few coming back, but they were overwhelmingly old people who wanted to go back to the place where they were born and grew up and lived their adult lives and to die there. But young people, no.

Q: How about the Croats? Was the OSCE monitoring them to make sure they weren't mean to the Serbs?

TOMSETH: Yes. That was the purpose of these field offices, to keep track of how return was progressing, whether it was return of Croats to eastern Slovenia or return of Serbs to what used to be the Kryena.

Q: Were you dealing at all trying tthe border between Bosnia and Croatia... When I was there not too long ago as an election monitor, there were terrible lines of trucks. It was hard to get through. It was not a friendly border. Were you trying to work on that?

TOMSETH: No, not really. By the time I got there, the problem of moving back and forth across the Bosnian border wasn't a problem other than the lack of bridges because so many of them had been blown. But no, whatever difficulties they had in terms of processing traffic back and forth had been pretty much resolved by the time I got there.

Q: It was really a bridge problem. There were just too many people trying to get through.

TOMSETH: Yes.

Q: How did you see relations between Croatia and Bosnia?

TOMSETH: I think you have to bear in mind that basically this is a tripod. In some respects, the writ of the Bosnian government was very limited. They were responsible for foreign affairs, so there was a Bosnian ambassador in Zagreb and a Croatian ambassador in Sarajevo, but a lot of the dealing between Croatia and Bosnia really was through the constituent republics, the Republic of Serbska and the Bosnian Federation. With the Republic of Serbska, actually, the official relationship was fairly good. I think this goes back to an issue... A lot of people remarked on the fact that Tudjman and his government rarely had anything to say about the way Milosevic treated Croats who remained in Yugoslavia. Similarly, with the Republic of Serbska, the focus of the relationship between Zagreb and Banja Luka tended to be on sorting out property issues. Zagreb was not necessarily anxious to have Bosnian Croats go back to Bosnia if it were in what is the Republic of Serbska, at least, although a number of them had come from there.

Q: Their houses were all blown up, I think.

TOMSETH: Yes. And they wanted to sort that out. You take that and we're going to take all the Serb properties in the Kryena. In fact, there were lots of Bosnian Croats in Serb houses. This was a big issue in the return program: how do you get the daisy chain moving? That's not a very good analogy, but you have to get the Bosnian Croat out of the Serb house before the Serb can come back and then where do you put the Bosnian Croat? Similarly, I think with the Federation, it was a much more complex relationship. Tudjman never really had given up the idea that he would have in the Federation at least a couple of cantons that were, if not incorporated into the Croatian state, would be controlled by Croats and Croats of his party, his HDZ Party. So, that relationship tended to be more complex and in some ways more acrimonious than the relationship with the Republic of Serbska.

Q: With the OSCE, these were mainly Europeans, weren't they, that you were administering, who were staffing this?

TOMSETH: The majority certainly. The American contingent actually was the single largest. We had about 24 or 25 Americans outside of the police group and then about 20 Americans in this 120 man and woman police operation. But the rest were Europeans. Over 20 of the 54 OSC states represented...

Q: Within this European contingent, you being the new boy on the block looking at Europe and all this, did you find Europeans were looking at, boy, they were sent to the wild borders of Europe? Did they have a feeling that this was a different world than they had ever known?

TOMSETH: Well, there were Europeans and Europeans. Tim Goldman liked to say that were had basically three cultures within the mission, that you had a North American culture, a Western European culture, and an Eastern European culture. In some respects, the Eastern Europeans had an easier time than the Western Europeans. Many of them were Slavic speakers. They could make a linguistic conversion more easily than the Western Europeans. And the Eastern Europeans tended to be professional diplomats or military people rather than NGOs (non governmental organizations). Western Europeans were more of a mix. You had some diplomats, some military, but a lot more NGO/private voluntary organization types. The Americans were the same way. There was a small contingent of Foreign Service personnel, a lot of ex military, and a fairly large component of people with NGO/PVO backgrounds.

Q: How did you find the mix worked?

TOMSETH: Well, that was one of the managerial challenges, figuring out ways or creating, if you will, a common mission management culture out of these three geographic cultures that Tim Goldman liked to refer to, and the various bureaucratic cultures that people came from. It was a challenge, but that was a lot of the fun of the job.

Q: Sure. Alright. Well, we might stop at this point. I take it wine making, Burgundy, is not in the offering at this point?

TOMSETH: Not immediately. My next project is to go to New York in a week to do the UN General Assembly for the East Asia Bureau.

End of interview