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

AMBASSADOR CHARLES O. CECIL

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: September 7, 2006

Copyright 2010 ADST

Q: Today is the 7th of September 2006. This is an interview with Charles O. Cecil. What does the "O" stand for?

CECIL: Oliver.

Q: And you go by Chuck.

CECIL: Right.

Q: This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Chuck, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

CECIL: I was born in Owensboro, Kentucky in 1940.

Q: Can you tell me something about your family? Let's start with your father's side, the Cecil side. What do you know about them?

CECIL: My father was a railroad man who worked for the Illinois Central Railroad as did his father and several of his uncles, his father's brothers. They were a Kentucky family. They had been there since the late 1700's. I know that my-if I get the number of greats correct-great, great, great, great grandfather migrated from Maryland, from St. Mary's County, Maryland, to Kentucky in 1785. They were part of a group of 65 Catholic families that had settled in Maryland. My family came in the late 1600's, early 1700's, something like that. They were English Catholics, and they were looking for religious freedom, so they came to Maryland. After three or four generations there, they migrated to Kentucky in 1785, and that's where the family stayed, and that's where I was born.

Q: Where you came from in Kentucky, was this one of those Kentucky places with the mountaineers and all that? Was this part of that, or was it a different area of Kentucky?

CECIL: Owensboro is one of the larger cities of Kentucky, probably about third, I suppose, in size. Louisville's obviously the largest. Owensboro's on the Ohio River. I lived there until I was about eight years old, and although I've made a few visits back since then, I have no family there now, so I'm no longer really current. My father and his part of the family were from a little bit farther east, south of Louisville. All those Maryland Catholic families settled in an area roughly 50 miles or maybe 75 miles southeast of Louisville, Kentucky. It's not mountain country. They're not hill people. They were farmers until the mid-1800's, and then they went into education. Four of my ancestors, four brothers, one of whom would be my great-great-great grandfather, established a boys school-a Catholic boys school-in a little town called Cecilia, Kentucky, which is a few miles from Elizabethtown.

Q: Was Cecilia named after Cecil?

CECIL: Yes, I think so, and the college was called Cecilian College, but it was only a secondary school, not a real college. One of those brothers went to Georgetown University, one went to Washington University of St. Louis, and I forget where the other two got their degrees. But back in the mid-1800's, I guess that was quite an achievement, and so that generation, at least those brothers, were into education and running the boys school, and I'm not sure what else they achieved because I'm not a genealogist.

Q: Where did the family come on your father's side during the Civil War? Kentucky was badly split, of course.

CECIL: Yes. My family never talked much about that, and I haven't done any real research to look into it, so I'm not sure where their sympathies lay back at that time. I suppose if I studied it a bit, there might be circumstantial evidence.

Q: Were there family stories about "Uncle Rupert was in the South Kentucky volunteers on the Union side?"

CECIL: No. There are no stories like that, so I suppose they weren't very involved in the war. I do know from the Maryland time, there was a time when I did a little research on the family, and I have seen a will from one of my ancestors willing, among other things, a slave. At least in Maryland they owned slaves. I've never heard the family talk about owning slaves in Kentucky, so I suspect, if anything, they were probably sympathetic toward the Union.

Q: What about on your mother's side? Where do they come from?

CECIL: My mother's name was Price, and her mother's name was May. That would be my grandmother. She often talked about a Judge George Washington Triplett who was her grandfather, I think. All of those names-Triplett, May, and Price-are English names. Although I don't know much about the history of that side, I just know that they trace their origins back to England, but I don't know even what century they came to this country.

Q: Were they a Kentucky family?

CECIL: Yes.

Q: Did you get any feel for being a Catholic family in what essentially is a pretty Baptist area? Rather fundamentalist area.

CECIL: It's the Cecils who were the Catholics. My mother's side-the Prices-were Methodists, so I was baptized a Catholic and raised Methodist. Later in college, I explored, tried out different churches just to see what appealed to me, and went to quite a variety of mostly Protestant churches. Eventually-we'll get to that when I get to my first Foreign Service assignment-I met my prospective wife who came from a very strong and solid German Catholic family, and that served to motivate me to turn back to the Catholic church. All of those Cecils were very active in the Catholic church. In our family, as far as I am aware, it was not a source of conflict between my mother and my father although my parents were divorced about the time I was seven. My father went off to World War II. I think he left in 1942, if I recall. He came back in '45, and around about '46 or '47, my parents were divorced. I was pretty young, as you can see, five, six, seven in that time frame there, and I never really questioned them as to why they split up, but in '48 my mother's parents, James R. Price and Lizzie Rea May, migrated to California and settled in the San Francisco Bay area, and my mother and I soon followed, so I continued to be raised in the Methodist church at that time.

Q: Did you mother or father go to college?

CECIL: No. My father, when he graduated from high school, I'm pretty sure that was in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, I recall him telling me later when I was a teenager, that his father gave him a choice on graduation: He could go to college, or he could have a car. You know, when we look at that, putting that kind of a choice in front of a 17 year old boy, it maybe wasn't a very smart thing to do, and my dad chose the car. Because all of his family was closely associated with the Illinois Central Railroad, he just gravitated to that kind of work. He was doing it before he went away to war, and when he returned he went back to that. In the war he was with the North African invasion, and he ran trains across North Africa carrying supplies and troops from Algiers over to Tunis. Then he followed the forces up through Sicily and Italy into Europe. He was always a railroad man. I had a lot of railroad lore and tradition around me as I was growing up. Even after my parents separated, I would often go back to Cecilia, Kentucky, to visit my grandmother on that side, and my great-uncles who lived there. My mother remarried, around 1949 I would guess. My step-father was in the Air Force, and that took me into a military frame of mind and existence, and we fell into the habit of being transferred every three years, and I think that's part of why I joined the Foreign Service. Eventually, I got used to a military pattern of life where you live somewhere for three years and then move on to a new place and do the same thing again.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

CECIL: I didn't have any while I was growing up essentially, but when I was 14, my mother and my step-father did have a daughter. So I have a half-sister who's 14 years younger than I am.

Q: Do you recall much about life in Kentucky?

CECIL: In bits and pieces. I certainly remember those summers when I visited my grandmother in Cecilia. That was a very, almost a rural kind of life. Cecilia was a little town. I think it was founded primarily because that's where the road, the highway, crossed the railroad, and that's probably why those four brothers chose that site to establish Cecilian College because there were two ways, then, students could get there: by train and by road. The town had maybe 600 people when I was young. Today it's been almost taken over by the larger town nearby of Elizabethtown. I don't think they've officially incorporated it, but it's become essentially a suburb. Elizabethtown is about five miles away. I remember those summers. Even though my family weren't farmers, my great-uncle Clarence, who lived two houses down from my grandmother, always had a large garden. It was kind of a rural milieu that I was in when I was there. Owensboro was just a town of about 50,000 people when I was young. I don't have too many memories of that. Going to the movie theater where my mother worked when she was young, and then she worked for a company called Ken Red which I think was a General Electric subsidiary during the war making light bulbs and things like that. When I left Kentucky to move to California, that really was the last time I lived there, so that would be 1948.

Q: Where in the San Francisco area did you first live?

CECIL: The town was Richmond, which is on the north side of the bay facing San Francisco. Just as you go around the bay, you come over the San Francisco Bridge. First you have Alameda then, if you went right, you'd have Oakland. If you go left you have Berkeley, El Cerrito, and then Richmond.

Q: You started in the California school system, didn't you?

CECIL: I went there off and on as I grew up because of my step-father's Air Force service, so when I first went to California, I was in the second grade. I went through half of the second grade at Grant School in Richmond, California. David Newsom's wife is a Grant Elementary School graduate I learned many years later. I went there the third grade. I went there three months of the fourth, and then we moved to Tacoma, Washington, where my step-dad was assigned to McCord Air Force Base. I finished the fourth in Tacoma, and the fifth grade-all of it-in Tacoma, and the first three months of the sixth grade. Then my step-father was transferred to Massachusetts, to Westover Air Force Base.

While we were in Washington State, actually, he spent thirteen months in Japan during the Korean War. In between the move from Washington to Massachusetts, my mother and I returned to Richmond, lived with my grandparents while my step-dad went ahead and got housing. I went three months of the sixth grade in Richmond and on to Massachusetts to finish it. Seventh grade in Massachusetts. The school was in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. Eighth grade... We went back to California for the summer because my step-dad was transferred to Rhein-Main Air Force Base at Frankfurt, Germany, and we had to wait till December before housing was available.

Q: What was his field in the Air Force?

CECIL: He was a flight engineer, enlisted man, a Technical Sergeant. He always said he didn't want to be a Master Sergeant because in those days he would not be allowed to fly any more. I don't know if that's true, but anyway, he was a flight engineer and devoted 20 years to his Air Force career. Then he went into the Federal Aviation Agency, it was called back then, for another 20 or 25 years. But to pick up your question about school, my mom and I spent the first three months of the eighth grade with my grandparents, and then we went to Rhein-Main Air Force Base where I finished the eighth grade. Then I went to the Frankfurt American High School the ninth and the tenth. The eleventh grade my step-dad was transferred to West Palm Beach Air Force Base, so I went to Palm Beach High School for the eleventh grade. Then that summer I went out to California to visit my grandparents. I never liked Palm Beach very much. We lived far from the school, it was a long bus ride, and I still had the same group of friends in California that I had known since second grade. I had seen them in the sixth and the eighth, and I just decided on my own with my grandparents' agreement, that I would stay in California for my senior year of high school. Basically, I told my folks that I wasn't coming home to West Palm Beach. I spent my senior year in Richmond, California. The school was Harry Ells High School. I applied to three or four colleges. It was quite natural when I was accepted at Berkeley that I just went to Berkeley because it was just five miles away. I had applied to Caltech, MIT, Rennselaer Polytech, and Berkeley-I was interested in science then, and saw that as my career path-but Berkeley was close-by, and we didn't have much money, so it made the most sense to go there.

Q: Go back a bit. In schools-start grammar school, elementary school, we'll go up-what courses did you enjoy and do well at, and what ones didn't you?

CECIL: I liked everything. I was a very avid learner. I just wanted to learn everything I could about everything, or it seemed that way. Whatever they could throw at me or whatever I could get, I studied as hard as I could. I remember as a freshman in Frankfort having a real confrontation with my homeroom teacher the first day of school when we were filling out our course list. The normal thing was to take four courses and a study hall, and that was it. I told him, "I want five courses," and he really tried to discourage me from that. He said, "Why do you want five?" I gave him a reason for every one, so he conceded. I enjoyed the math and science just as much as the English and the history. It was really only in college that I began to differentiate between some subjects that I liked a lot more than others.

Q: As a small child, were you much of a reader?

CECIL: Yes, I was always a reader.

Q: Do you recall any types of books or books that you read that particularly spring to mind?

CECIL: I loved to read about history. I read all kinds of history. I tried to read Gibbons'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire when I was in the eighth grade.

Q: Ouch!

CECIL: Yeah! I didn't maybe get too far into it, but I tried. I read whatever kind of history I could get. My first few months at Rhein-Main I read most of the science fiction books in the base library. And I liked travel books. I was expecting you would ask me why or what was it that brought you to the Foreign Service, and we've seen part of the answer already. I got used to the military lifestyle of moving periodically, but another thing I think was a factor was that in California in the second or third grade-I don't remember which-I started stamp collecting. I was fascinated by the writing on the Arabic stamps, Egypt in particular, and maybe I had a few others from Tunisia or from Saudi Arabia. That writing just really caught my eye, and I said to myself, "I would really like to learn to read that." So there at the second or third grade, I was already interested in foreign things, and I probably didn't know what a foreign culture was, but that came later. I think the key point there was the two and a half years that I lived in Germany.

Q: You were in Germany from when to when?

CECIL: We arrived in Germany on Christmas Day, 1953-my step-dad had been there about six months ahead of us, but I'm talking about me and my mother-and we left in July of '56. We lived in a little German town outside of Frankfurt called Neu-Isenburg, so we had German neighbors. Most of the housing in our part of town was requisitioned housing that had been seized from the German owners, but during the time we were there, they were in the process of returning housing to the original owners. We were not living on a base. We had some German families around us, and if we wanted bread, we went to the bakery on the corner, or to the pastry shop. For the eighth grade, the school was on the base, and I went on the school bus. I started studying German immediately as everyone did, and then in Frankfurt, in the high school, I continued my study of German. I was a bike rider. I joined the German Youth Hostel Association and started riding my bike to different places around Europe. In the summer of '55, one friend and I rode our bikes to England, so I was 15. I've often wondered why my parents let me go.

Q: It was a safe period.

CECIL: It was. We stayed in youth hostels and rode to England and back, and then the following March and April with a different friend, we went two weeks down through Switzerland and back. We were surprised by the snow there. We didn't know it snowed in Switzerland the first week of April, but it sure did! Then the summer of '56 I took a four week trip to Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen. I started with three friends, but for some reasons that probably aren't too relevant here, one went home the first night because he couldn't take the pace, and the other two who were brothers and I got separated on the third day. The next three and a half weeks I went on my own and completed that trip. I think living in a foreign culture, traveling in foreign countries, studying a foreign language that I really enjoyed-all of this predisposed me to look for ways that I could continue this kind of life.

Q: How did your German come out while you were a kid?

CECIL: After coming home from my junior year in West Palm Beach, they didn't offer German, so I studied French. I had sampled French in the eighth grade in California because the three months I was there, they had what was called Conversational French for eighth graders, so I had a taste of that. I always seemed to like foreign languages. I went back to French for the eleventh grade, and then in California for the twelfth, it only made sense to carry on the French. But when I went to Berkeley, I did manage during the fours years at Berkeley to get two and a half more years of German, so I could read it quite well. We were reading literature in some of those advanced courses. I remember my German teacher saying to me once... We were walking on the campus together, and he was talking about the difficulties some of the students were having in his class. Then he turned to me and he said, "But you, Mr. Cecil, you could be a schpy," because I did have a very good German accent. One of my Foreign Service regrets is that the Foreign Service never sent me back to a German speaking assignment even though I tried at least once, maybe twice, in my career to get such assignments.

Q: While you were in Frankfurt, during part of that time I was Vice-Consul registering baby births at the consulate in Frankfurt.

CECIL: You might have registered my sister then! She was born in Wiesbaden in 1954.

Q: We were running a real mill there because of the 97th General and the Wiesbaden Hospital. Did you find that you were going on these bike trips, did you feel that you were somewhat separated from a great number of your fellow students? I think that many of these military schools, many of the students there really stuck right to the base. It's awfully easy for kids, even more for the families to get trapped in the equivalent of a base and huddle away, away from the community.

CECIL: There certainly was some of that, maybe a lot of it. I know that many of my classmates were unhappy being in Germany. I think they were parroting what they heard from their parents. I only can assume that. They didn't like being there. They had derogatory terms for the Germans. I don't know how numerous that was, I just know there were students who had those kinds of feelings, but it didn't matter to me, and it didn't affect me. I was always able to find a friend-or more than one-who would share my interest in biking and going around and exploring where we were. I guess I was just doing my own thing and enjoying it, loving it!

Q: You went to Berkeley. You were at Berkeley from when to when?

CECIL: From September of '58 to June of '62.

Q: This was before all hell broke loose at Berkeley, wasn't it?

CECIL: No. It was breaking loose during my time.

Q: Let's talk about Berkeley. When you got there, what was it like?

CECIL: It was an extremely engaged campus, politically speaking. It was a real melting pot of political activity, a cauldron, one should say. There were frequent marches and demonstrations to ban the bomb, to halt nuclear testing. There were fiery and inflammatory speakers. There was at least one, I think, more than one sit-in in the administration headquarters building during my time, what was called Sproul Hall. The year after I graduated... Actually I think it was the fall, I believe, after I graduated, so I left in June of '62, and a young radical named Mario Savio lay down on the railroad tracks in downtown Berkeley to stop the trains from going through. I think they were protesting the bomb or something. Since I wasn't in town, I'm not sure what it was, but I know Berkeley was a center of political activism during those years. But, moving ahead quickly, in the fall of '62 I came to Washington, D.C. to begin two years at SAIS (The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; now it's called The Paul Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. It's part of Johns Hopkins.) Then I went into the Air Force for about two years. Then I joined the Foreign Service in March of '66. I used to joke to people that I was lucky enough to get into the Foreign Service when they were still taking Berkeley graduates. Now that seems a little hard to relate to because I've been back to Berkeley several times over the years, and I don't think it had that same level of political engagement that it used to have.

Q: What courses were you taking that you found significant at Berkeley?

CECIL: I applied to Berkeley and also MIT and Cal Tech and Rensselaer Polytech for admission as an engineering student. Science fascinated me. Berkeley admitted me to the College of Engineering but on condition that I take a mechanical drawing course that summer before entering because I had never taken that. I went back to West Palm Beach where my folks were and spent the summer with them and took this mechanical drawing course by correspondence. I found it so boring, and I loathed every lesson, but I finished it. I said if engineering had anything to do with this, this is not my cup of tea. The day I registered in September to enter the College of Engineering, I then walked across the campus to the College of Letters and Science and filed a petition to transfer to the College of Letters and Science as a physics major. That was routinely accepted, so I became a physics major, and I started my first semester. I took analytic geometry and differential calculus. I took the first half of freshman chemistry. I had the required English course. I took Air Force ROTC because my step-dad had convinced me that since we had the draft, it would be better for me to plan my military service and not have my life interrupted by being called unexpectedly. He convinced me to go into Air Force ROTC and serve as an officer when I finished that. So there was the Air Force ROTC course, and I had room for one elective. The first semester, I took anthropology which was something totally new to me. I didn't have much of an idea of what it was about. I found the analytic geometry and differential calculus very difficult, very challenging. The chemistry I could do OK, but it didn't excite me. English was fine; I enjoyed reading those things. Air Force ROTC didn't have much intellectual content at the beginning. It got more intellectual as you went into the third and fourth years. The anthropology course was absolutely fascinating to me. The idea of studying and analyzing other cultures. We studied the Washoe Indians of the southern California-Nevada area; we studied whoever they are up in British Columbia that have the potlatches, and we studied a couple of foreign cultures. That just absolutely fascinated me. The next semester I continued with the chemistry because you had to have a certain amount of science anyway. I had to take another English course. I took U. S. government as my elective, the ROTC, and I decided right away, I guess probably simultaneously with registering for the second semester, that I really didn't think I wanted to be a physics major, either. I applied for a change of major to political science, and so for the next three and a half years, I was a poly-sci major and took the normal kinds of courses a poly-sci major would take, plus the German and the Air Force ROTC.

Q: Berkeley was a cauldron of political causes and protests and everything else at the time. Political science as a major has changed over the years. It's gotten very quantitative, and I think they've lost their way, but that's a personal opinion. What were you studying as a political science major at Berkeley?

CECIL: My first course, of course, was just a general survey of U. S. government and how it worked. The professor, Peter Odegarde, was an extremely engaging professor. The lecture hall probably had 600 students in it, but he held our attention from start to finish. He had so much insight and so many interesting stories to tell. I can't tell you at this point the titles of the courses I took, but I don't think they departed too much from what a poly-sci major would have to take. There was a course in comparative government somewhere along the way where we looked, I know, at the English form of government and the French and compared them to ours. My junior year I was invited to join the poly-sci honors program which was a great opportunity. There were about a dozen of us or so invited into a two year honors program where we worked very closely with two professors: Paul Seabury was one, and Richard Cox was the other. We got a lot of personal attention. This small group of 12 met once or twice a week during the junior year. Cox was especially adept at leading us through the Greek writers, especially Aristotle and Plato, and trying to make that relevant to today, and telling us things that we would never have probably seen on our own, taking us into levels of analysis that he said were almost impossible for the average reader today to do because there were so many things about intellectual thought and assumptions of 2000 years ago that had been forgotten, and unless you knew those things, you didn't fully realize everything that was here in these writings. That was fascinating. In my senior year, we all had to write a senior honors thesis. I came to campus in September of my senior year. I saw a notice on a bulletin board from an organization called The Experiment in International Living, headquartered in Putney, Vermont. It announced that they were going to open the coming summer-the summer of '62-their first exchange program in Nigeria. It gave a little bit of detail. It was four weeks with a Nigerian family, four weeks traveling around the country, a little bit or orientation in Vermont before going. It said it was a thousand dollars cost; maybe it was eleven hundred-one or the other-a thousand dollars as I recall it. At the bottom line it said, "Scholarships available to well-qualified applicants," and I thought "Wow! The opportunity to spend a summer in Africa!" But I didn't have a thousand dollars, and I needed to work every summer to earn money for the fall. I said to myself, "How can I become a well-qualified applicant in a few months?" You had to file your application in October or November, and they were going to make their selections in March or April, so I didn't have a whole lot of time to work on it. I thought it through and I said, "Well, my military family history qualifies me to represent this country fairly well." I pointed out in what I wrote in my application that I had lived in the four corners and the middle of the U. S. I lived in Massachusetts, Florida, California, and in Washington State. I was born in Kentucky, and my parents at that time were living in Oklahoma City. My dad was on his last Air Force assignment. I said, "I really know this country, and I'm going to write my senior honors thesis on the role of Islam in Nigerian politics, and my professor Seabury, after considering two or three other topics said, "That sounds fine. Why don't you do that?" I wrote that thesis, and the Experiment said, "You're worth a thousand-dollar bet," and so I went off to Nigeria in June or July, whichever it was, in '62.

Q: You didn't have to worry about ROTC?

CECIL: They were very nice to me. I finished that program, and they offered me a regular commission, and they said, "If you want to go to graduate school, we'll defer your active duty." While I was applying to Putney for the summer scholarship, I was also applying to SAIS for a fellowship to come to SAIS and do a two-year Master's program.

They offered a two-year master's degree in international relations, and they required you to concentrate on a geographic area of the world, and they had some other requirements like two years of economics. I think the school is somewhat larger now than it was then but still limits itself to international affairs. In 1962 they were beginning to offer a PhD program as well.

Q: Turning back to this Nigerian experience. Tell me about it.

CECIL: There were about 11 or 12 of us in our group. Most like me were college graduates, just graduated. I mean, filling a summer before going on to other things. There was one member who was a high school teacher in his early 40's, and our leader was also a teacher about the same age of 40 or 45 or so. We were each assigned a Nigerian family to live with. We did that for four weeks. We came together once a week, every Wednesday, for some kind of a field trip to some site of cultural or historical importance, but otherwise, we spent the other six days of the week with our families and doing whatever seemed natural. I was placed with the most westernized of the 11 or 12 families. Sorry, I've forgotten how many it was. My host was the Archdeacon of Ibadan in the Anglican Church. He was British educated, and his wife was a well educated woman. I don't know exactly what her schooling was now. They were Yoruba, so I had four weeks in a Yoruba family but a very Anglicized, Westernized Yoruba family. The other member of my group who lived closest to me in Ibadan-we all went to Ibadan-the one who lived closest enough to walk to, lived in the most traditional of the 12 host families. His host was Chief Oshoba, who was a Yoruba chief. In that context, what chief meant was he was basically a kind of ward heeler in charge of a certain section of Ibadan. His family was very traditional. He had very little formal education. My friend Steve Monsma from Holland, Michigan, spent four weeks in that family and never did determine how many wives Chief Oshoba had. Couldn't tell. Normally we would have the morning with our family doing whatever seemed appropriate or was happening, and then after lunch Steve and I would get together and walk around Ibadan and explore. At the end of the four weeks, the group reassembled. Theoretically, in the Experiment in International Living's plan, you invite a member of your host family to accompany you on the next four weeks as a way of repaying your family for their hospitality. In our case, not a single member could or wanted to accompany us, so we group of 12 plus our leader spent the next four weeks touring. We went to the eastern part. In those days there were only three regions in Nigeria: the Western, Eastern, and Northern. We went to places like Port Harcourt where we actually had another five day home stay. Each of us went to an Ibo family for five days. I went to the home of a barrister, Napo Graham Douglas, again, a very well educated, very Anglicized Nigerian family. He had a fantastic classical music collection of records. Then we went on to places like Calabar and Enugu where the University of Nigeria was just then being established, and then we went north by train to Kaduna and Kano....

Q: I want to go back. You were in Nigeria before the Biafran War?

CECIL: Right.

Q: Did you get any feel about the Yoruba, the Hausa, the Biafran tensions, or was that very obvious to you or not?

CECIL: The Biafran tensions-the origins of the Biafran War-were not obvious to me at that time. Even though it was an Ibo family that I stayed with in Port Harcourt we did not hear about tensions with the Western Region. We were oblivious to that. What we did certainly see and sense and hear a lot about was when we went to the north, the northerners, the Hausa, were very vocal. These were mostly Muslim, of course, in the north whereas the Ibo and the Yoruba are mostly Christian. The northerners filled us with examples of neglect by the southern-dominated government. Money was being spent on development in the south and not in the north. Northerners were discriminated against when it came to awarding scholarships and everything. There was a very clear picture given to us of tension between the Muslim north and the Christian south, but I didn't...at least now I don't recall having any inkling of what was going to happen in Biafra a few years later.

Q: Did you find that your honors paper on Islam and on Nigeria was... Did this reinforce? It must have been quite useful to you.

CECIL: It was very useful. It probably was about the best thing I could have done to prepare for the trip. Looking back on it, of course, it was terribly superficial. It was almost all based on whatever written sources I could find, and those were mostly magazine articles back then. There were a few Nigerian students at Berkeley. I was able to interview a few of them, but it was mostly a library project. But sure, it made me more perceptive and more observant in Nigeria.

Q: Did you run across embassy people at all? Did you get any feel for that?

CECIL: We had no contact in Lagos or Ibadan. There was a consulate at the time in Ibadan. Only in Kaduna out of curiosity, two or three of us one day walked to the consulate just to see it, and some nice FSO greeted us at the door and spent five minutes with us, but we didn't really have any business or any needs, so we just basically said, "Hello," and continued on our way. So no, no real substantive contact. I can tell you, though, that the Foreign Service seed was again planted in my mind in my Berkeley years because two of my best friends were interested in the Foreign Service, and they knew a lot more about it than I did. When someone, some speaker, from the Foreign Service came to campus, they made sure I went with them to hear him. One of them went on after graduating to join the CIA. The other one didn't follow that pattern. His father had a family business, and he worked for a while in the family business and then went into the Air Force to satisfy his military obligation, and then spent his life working as a civilian for the Air Force in the post-exchange system. Those two friends first drew my attention to this thing called the Foreign Service, so it was latent back there in my mind.

Q: You started SAIS when?

CECIL: September of '62.

Q: You got to Washington just in time for the Cuban missile crisis.

CECIL: That's right. Though I don't recall much about it now. What really left a big impression on me was the Kennedy assassination. I was here for that, in my second year at SAIS.

I was at Andrews Air Force Base that day. I was filling my car with gas when the news came over the radio. As I drove back into town, all the way in I heard the news developing. By the time I reached my apartment which was just off DuPont Circle, the president was dead. I remember that and the funeral. I was here for that. I lined the streets to watch everyone march from the White House up to St. Matthew's Cathedral. I was certainly a Kennedy admirer, and I felt a great sense of loss over that. I had seen him twice in person, once at Berkeley during his campaign, and once very close at Otis AFB, Massachusetts the summer I was there for AFROTC summer camp (1961). I had been inspired by his speeches and by what I thought was his almost intuitive understanding of the Third World viewpoint. He seemed to have an affinity for Third World leaders. I remember a photo showing him walking with Nehru on the White House grounds, for instance. I even think he had a good relationship with Seiko Tourï¿½. He was certainly an inspiration to me, and I think the idea that I could serve an administration motivated by those kinds of ideals probably also kept the Foreign Service idea alive in my mind. I was equally disposed-if not equally, at least significantly disposed-to making a career in the Air Force. My father-my step-father, actually-had been very happy with his career, and I had liked that kind of life. I would have done it if I could have also satisfied my interest in foreign relations, foreign affairs. The Air Force sent me, first of all, to a school in Denver, Colorado, to teach me to be a photo and radar imagery interpreter. That was interesting. It was stimulating, good intellectual work. We did things like bomb damage assessments of Vietnam bombing runs. I was sent from that school to March Air Force Base, Riverside, California, to a squadron whose job it was to make maps of China and the Soviet Union using very highly secret satellite photography at that time. This was the early '60s. I spent six weeks at one point at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona. That was solid bomb damage assessment work from Vietnam. They would fly the photography all the way from Vietnam to Tucson for us to analyze and tell them whether they had got the target or whether they had to go back again. That was interesting, but I wanted to go overseas, and I volunteered for assignments at Wheelus Air Force Base in Tripoli, Libya or Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, or we had one or two bases in Morocco at the time: Sidi Slimane and Nouasseur. I even found once an item about a need for some kind of assistance at our air attachï¿½ office in Kinshasa. I filed every application I could through the channels that were available, trying to get assigned overseas. I got nowhere, basically. The Christmas vacation of 1965, I came to Washington. My step-dad had retired from the Air Force and was now in Washington, working for the Federal Aviation Agency, so I came home for Christmas. I went to the Pentagon to see the two colonels running the air attachï¿½ and the air intelligence assignment systems. They had offices side-by-side, and I went in to them and said, "Look, I've got this education." I should add here that my two years at SAIS were financed under the National Defense Foreign Language Fellowship program to study Arabic. It was one of the Kennedy initiatives to encourage the study of exotic foreign languages. Seems like the wheel's turning again. Once again we seem to have discovered that we have a need for diplomatic and military personnel who speak those "exotic" languages. I said to those colonels, "I really would like to apply my knowledge of foreign affairs to the work of the Air Force." They said, "Well, Lieutenant, first of all, we're all going to Vietnam, and the really important thing now is that you concentrate on your military specialty. But when you're a major, then we might find a way to get you into that part of the world that you're really interested in." I interpreted that to mean, "OK. After ten years or so, there might be hope of getting overseas to the part of the world that interested me which was Africa and the Middle East. While I was in the Air Force, I was going through the Foreign Service exam procedures. I took the written exam in Denver, I took the oral in Los Angeles, and I took the medical in Tucson as I was doing my Air Force work. The Department sent me a letter saying, "You're on the register, but you'll have to wait till you finish your military service. We will not intervene with the Air Force to shorten that, so let us know when you're available." After my conversation with those two colonels in December of '65, if I went back to Riverside, and I wrote a letter to my congressman who was Gene Tunney, son of the prize fighter. Gene Tunney represented us.

Q: He was senator, wasn't he?

CECIL: He ran for the senate. I don't know if he was ever elected. He did run. I'm not sure if he was successful in that. At the time of my incident, he was a congressman. I was very discouraged, and in January or February-probably January-of '66, I wrote him a letter, and I said... This is true. I had done more digging in the regulations of the Air Force. I had found an Air Force regulation that said, "If you are commissioned in the Foreign Service of the United States, you automatically relinquish your military commission." Automatically relinquish! First what I did when I found out, I called the registrar's office, and they said, "Oh, yes. We know about the regulation, but that's the part where we won't interfere. You've got to work that out with the Air Force on your own. We don't do that." So, I wrote this letter to Tunney, and I said, "The government spent $16,000 on me," which was a lot more then than now, "to support me for two years to study Arabic under the National Defense Education Act. One would have thought that the natural place to apply this knowledge would be in our Armed Services." I told him of my experience and my attempts, and I said, "I'm not asking you to do anything, but I'm going next week to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas." I'd gotten my squadron commander's approval to take three days leave and go present my case for an early discharge. My squadron commander knew where my interests were, and he was basically sympathetic. He said, "You can go. It's your time, and we don't have any problem with your taking three days leave." I said to Tunney, "If I run into a blank wall at Lackland, here are all the facts of my case, so we don't have to start talking about it on the phone with you or a staff member at that point. You've got it here. But please, don't do anything unless I call on you." I went to Lackland; I went to the office; I found a chief warrant officer at the desk who listened to my case. He said, "Yes, we know about this regulation." He said, "It's based on a law passed by Congress in 1867 to prevent justices of the peace in the South from also holding military commissions in the occupying army." He said, "It's rarely used, but you go down the hall and see the lawyers." So, he sent me off. I saw the lawyers, and they were sort of aware of it, too, and they said pretty much the same thing: "Yes, it's based on a hundred-year-old law. We don't think it's very relevant today." I went back after that little session. He sent me back to the warrant officer and, in the meantime, during that hour literally, when I was down the hall, Tunney's telegram arrived at this office. Tunney sent a very short telegram saying, "I'm aware of the case of Lt. Charles O. Cecil, and I ask that you give every favorable consideration to his request." That's all he said! Everything changed in that hour. The warrant officer showed it to a major sitting a little bit father back in the room, Major Rettit, and he said, "Mr. Warburton," I don't know his real name, but, "Mr. Warburton, there's a plane back to Riverside this afternoon at 3:00. Do you think we could have the lieutenant's paperwork all ready for him so he could catch that flight?" It happened. It was amazing. They drew up orders for me that said contingent upon my being sworn in as a Foreign Service Officer, I would then be automatically discharged from my military obligation. I got back to March AFB and called the registrar. They said, "We have a class convening on March 30," I think it was. It was already something like March 20. They said, "If you can get here, we'll swear you in." I managed to make it. I drove straight across country four days and nights. I got here the 29th of March, and I was sworn in on the 30th. Within three months I was in Kuwait on my first Foreign Service assignment. I always felt that the government finally started getting its money's worth out of that.

Q: When you took the oral exam, do you recall any of the questions that were asked of you?

CECIL: I remember one which I thought was a real softball, and I was always puzzled that they wasted their time on it. They knew from something I had written, I guess, that I was still a stamp collector and, in fact, my main job to support myself at Berkeley was that I worked Friday nights and Saturdays in a stamp store where stamps were sold to collectors. One of the examiners said, "If you were to illustrate the history of the United States by choosing a dozen U. S. postage stamps, which ones would you choose?" Well, I started to answer the question, and I gave him about three or four, and he said, "That's fine. OK. We can see you know." It was, as I say, a real softball. What else they asked me? I can't remember. I think the reason I remember that one is that I thought it was such a stupid question.

Q: I used to give the oral exam, and sometimes you pose a question like that so a person would get all tied up. Some really couldn't organize themselves. What they really wanted to see was can the person come up with something and come up with something coherent.

CECIL: So my Air Force career was a bit short, and in March I joined the Foreign Service, and in July I arrived in Kuwait. I did the basic course here, and I had one interesting little benefit before going to Kuwait. One day the phone rang. I guess we were just finishing up the A100 course, and the lady on the line said would I be interested in being the escort for the Jordanian minister of tourism, Mohamed Touqan, who was coming on an IV grant, had never been to the States before, and he was on a 40-day grant. They shortened them later. They thought that was too much for one officer, but they were going to divide it up into two 20-day stretches, and would I like to be his escort for the first 20 days while he visited our national parks to see what kind of tourist facilities Americans were used to because Jordan was going to establish a series of national parks. I had that very pleasant duty. I went with the gentleman from here to various places: New York City, Niagara Falls, Chicago, by Pullman train to Denver. I rented a car. I drove over the Rockies to Salt Lake City, stopping in various places along the way, and in Salt Lake City, I turned him over to my successor escort, and came back. Took the consular course, two weeks I think it was at that time, and was on my way to Kuwait.

Q: Do you recall anything about your basic officer course, the composition or...?

CECIL: Alex Davitt was the chairman, and I believe his assistant was Ralph Jones. I believe it was Jones. Davitt presented the image of a consummate diplomat, impeccably dressed every day, very articulate, very precise in this thinking and his management of the course. Ralph Jones was more your sort of average FSO. I'm sure he was a perfectly capable officer, but he suffered by comparison with Davitt, who was so polished. We were 37 of us, I believe. One woman, she didn't do her sex any good when she resigned the last day of the class to get married. So she went through the training course and resigned on the final day. It was a mixture of State and USIA officers, a fine group of people. I remember that Ray Seitz and I-we were in the class together-wrote a memo to Davitt and Jones at the end suggesting some things that we thought should be improved. That was pretty audacious, I guess. Some cheek. That means, I guess, that weren't fully satisfied with the orientation that we got, but I certainly don't remember what that criticism was today. It was for me, again, a big learning experience. I think I liked it.

KUWAIT

Q: You went to Kuwait and were there from when to when?

CECIL: Two years, from July of '66 to July of '68.

Q: How far did you come along in Arabic at SAIS?

CECIL: Learned almost nothing. The two year course at SAIS was taught by an Egyptian professor, Wilson Bishai, very academically oriented. He loved to do arcane academic research, and he was not really a language teacher, but I think when you look at the whole field of language teaching methodology, it was not very well advanced in the early '60s. We focused largely on reading, and we used the textbook by the authority at the time named Thatcher. Thatcher's Arabic Grammar. It was classical Arabic. There was virtually nothing of a modern nature to the course. Only toward the end of the second year did he begin to use newspapers to find reading materials that we could try to read and discuss. I'm afraid I didn't learn very much out of that. When I got to Kuwait, I took full advantage of the post-language program. That meant that I had maybe a couple of hours a week of opportunity with an instructor. I studied. I tried to improve. Again, I wanted to speak it, and I wanted to read it. At the end of that assignment when I came back to Washington, I did go to FSI for testing, and they gave me an S2 and maybe an R-1+. That's what I came away with, basically working on my own and later as we go through this, you'll see I went to FSI Beirut and took the real course there.

Q: You were in Kuwait for two years,...

CECIL: Sixty-six to sixty-eight.

Q: What was the situation in Kuwait at that time?

CECIL: Unless you were interested in the Middle East, of course, most Americans didn't know where Kuwait was or what it was. Internally, I guess you would say it was outwardly stable. But there were and have been for a long time certain internal tensions, social and political, within Kuwaiti society. There's a cleavage between the Shiite and the Sunni. The Sunnis are the rulers. Looking back, I wish I had known more about that before I had arrived, and I wish I had been a more astute observer and a better student while I was there. But I was aware to some degree, anyway, that the Sunnis looked down on the Shias and didn't fully trust them, didn't think they were genuine Kuwaitis. Since a large number of the Shias had family ties to Iran that was true. I don't think it manifested itself outwardly to the degree that a foreigner would easily observe it. I did know that they went to different mosques. They didn't go to the same mosque. That sort of thing. That's the kind of superficial observation I was making. It was a wonderful first assignment. In those days it was a rotational assignment where I went through the different sections of the embassy. I maybe wasn't totally happy with the way the time was divided, but that was OK, and that was basically beyond my control, so I tried to be a good sport and do what they wanted me to do. When I arrived, I spent my first four weeks in the consular section because there was a gap between the outgoing and the incoming consular officers. That position was used for cover for one of the other agency people in those days. I filled the gap for four weeks, then the admin officer was due his home leave, so for six weeks I was admin officer, basically, so they could get a signature on documents that an American had to sign. Then I had a very interesting six months as political officer. There was no regular political officer there. The chief of station had the title, but he was doing his own work and wasn't engaged, really, in the kind of reporting that the State Department was doing. Then I was assigned to the economic-commercial section where there was an officer on his, I think he was on his third tour, Jim Placke, a very fine supervisor. I learned a lot from him. That's where the real work load was, in the commercial section. I was initially told that I would work there for six months, and then they asked me to stay on there for another six months, and finally an additional three months, again, just because the workload demanded it. Jim was very heavily into oil reporting and financial reporting, and he didn't have time to handle the day-to-day commercial work. I had 15 months as commercial officer by the time my tour was over, but even so, during that time, after hours and evenings my real love was political reporting, and I developed a pretty wide circle of Kuwaiti friends and contacts. Mid-way through my tour occurred the June '67 Arab-Israeli war, and one of the results of that was that April Glaspie was transferred to Kuwait from Amman where she had been on her first assignment. April and I had been at SAIS together, so we knew each other, and we shared a lot of the same interests. If anything, that gave renewed impetus to pursuing some of the political and social questions that we were interested in. We... I can't speak for her, but I certainly had a very satisfying introduction to the Foreign Service. I was looking the other night when I knew I was coming to see you, I happened to have my little pocket calendar from 1968. I have a lot of them. I don't have them all between then and now, but I have a shoebox I've put them in over the years. I flipped back to the phone list in the back of that pocket calendar and found I had 58 Kuwaiti phone numbers there that were mostly my age and maybe a little bit senior to me in some cases. Those were all good working contacts, professional contacts, and social contacts. I spent a lot of time in Kuwaiti circles. I will admit that a lot of those Kuwaitis were U. S. educated, but that was one of the focuses of our interests. The embassy wanted me to cultivate the younger generation and find out what they were thinking, and I had a great time doing it.

Q: What was the role of the Palestinians at that point, from your perspective in Kuwait?

CECIL: I would say that I looked at them as the technocrats that kept the place running. Kuwaitis had a reputation for not wanting to work very hard, for wanting to hire somebody to do their job, and they turned first to other Arabs and, depending on the kind of work, of course, cast the net wider beyond that. I didn't know too many Palestinians. To me, it wasn't my reason for being there. Maybe I should have had a broader concept of my work, but I thought my work was to get to know Kuwait and Kuwaitis, so I didn't make a special effort to seek out Palestinians.

Q: The Kuwaitis had the reputation and probably still do of being the most disliked by their Arab neighbors, arrogant and relying on other people to do their work for them.

CECIL: Arrogant is the word that is most frequently cited, especially by the lower Gulf Arabs.

Q: I served from '58 to '60 in Dhahran.

CECIL: I think the farther down the Gulf you went, the more likely they were to regard the Kuwaitis as arrogant and overbearing. I think the Kuwaitis did look down on the Gulf Arabs to some degree. I guess I didn't focus much on that. The leadership in the embassy was certainly ideal for a new officer. Howard Cottam was our ambassador.

Q: What was his background?

CECIL: Well, I don't know how much of it I remember now. He was a career officer. He had taken an interest in Kuwait and the Gulf. He was our first resident ambassador. Prior to Cottam, the ambassador in Baghdad had covered Kuwait as well. Howard Cottam was a consummate public relations man. I don't mean that in any bad sense; it was in the very best sense. He was very adept at getting full benefit in terms of what today we call public diplomacy. I don't think we used the term too much back then. He was very adept at making sure that every opportunity to get favorable attention to U. S. positions, attitudes, actions, activities, programs, whatever, he was out there to get it. The Kuwaitis recognized his genuine interest in Kuwait, and they responded very warmly to him. He had a staff meeting every morning at 7:15. We worked six days a week at that post. We worked the Arab Muslim work week from Saturday through Thursday. We worked from 7:00 in the morning straight through until 2:00. No lunch break. The only exception being that on Sunday we quit at noon. Seven to twelve. If you add all that up, six days a week, Sundays seven to twelve, you come up with 40 hours per week. There was a law back then-I don't know if it still exists-that required extra pay for Sunday work. That was the embassy's gesture to Washington to try to minimize the Sunday work. We got off at noon. We had these staff meetings at 7:15. John Gatch was the DCM, Jim Placke the econ commercial officer, Sam Wyman the consul, Bob Carlson I believe it was, the Political Officer, and Frank Berry the admin officer, and then the second year April was there as an additional junior officer. Those staff meetings were run very efficiently, just like clockwork. They rarely-I think I could say never-lasted more than half an hour and very often were only 15- or 20-minute affairs. Everybody went around the circle. The ambassador said what was on his mind. He or the DCM made sure we knew what we were expected to do for the day. One of the benefits was that everybody knew what everybody was doing because that was the whole embassy. We'd sit there in the ambassador's office in a little circle, so we all knew what we were doing, and if we stumbled across anything of some relevance to somebody else, you'd just go tell him what I've learned or what you need to know. The whole embassy hummed along like clockwork. It was a great, great assignment with Cottam as our example, and such good officers as Jim Placke there as well. John Gatch was fine, too. He was a very fatherly figure and I think maybe tried to moderate some of our more enthusiastic reporting interests.

Q: What was going on? Was there anything going on? You had an absolute monarchy, or a sheikdom, or what?

CECIL: The Emir of Kuwait is what they call the ruler. What was going on? The Kuwaiti government was expanding its own ability to deal with international issues at the time. I remember the day that I discovered that in the Emir's staff they were creating an office of four young Kuwaitis to advise the Emir on U. S. related issues. I remember the ambassador's reaction to that. He said, "That's a wonderful discovery! Now our job is to get every piece of favorable information we can in front of those four young men to facilitate their work, to make it easier, so that they can advise the Emir in ways that will serve our interests." He wasn't suggesting in any way that we could buy those Kuwaitis or subvert them, but here is a wonderful opportunity, we know this little group exists. Now we're going to feed them everything we can that will help us. Trying to learn more about how the government functioned was the way I saw my job, and I know April saw her job that way, too. The big crisis, of course, was the June 5 War of '67 and the uncertainty...

Q: This was the Six Day War.

CECIL: Yes. There was uncertainty for a few hours over whether Kuwait was going to join the other Arab countries that were breaking relations with us. We thought we might all be out of there within a few days. The ambassador went to see the Emir, and the Emir assured him. He said, "No. Just have your tea and relax. We have no intention of breaking relations." It no doubt introduced a new difficulty into our relations because the Kuwaitis had to be even more careful than they had been before not to be seen by their Arab neighbors as being too subservient to our interests. That, I think, maybe... I feel it didn't affect me that much, but I'm sure it gave the ambassador and the DCM a lot more to think about. Probably did make their work more difficult in some ways. I was trying to learn as much as I could about how Kuwaiti society functioned and what the desires and motivations of the young generation were. There was an active Arab Nationalist Movement in Kuwait, very critical-even hostile-to U. S. interests. The leader of that movement was a Doctor Ahmed al-Khatib. He was a practicing medical doctor but a very active politician and was a member of the National Assembly. I'm not sure how he managed to get elected to that position, and I might be wrong about that. Nevertheless, he was a very vocal critic of the United States, and the press often would note things that Dr. Khatib said. Nobody in the embassy knew him, or if the station chief did, he wasn't admitting it and didn't talk about it. I had a number of sore throats during that assignment. Eventually, towards the end of my tour, it resulted in a tonsillectomy, and the sore throats ended. But I wanted to meet Dr. Khatib, so I waited until I had a bad sore throat, and I went to his office as a patient. He accepted me just like any other patient in the waiting room, looked at my throat, prescribed something, probably told me to go gargle hot salt water and I don't know what, and that was the way I met him. I took advantage of that to ask him a few non-medical questions and arranged another appointment to come back in a week and have him check me again. It resulted in his inviting me to his home for lunch one day, just the two of us. I remember that was the first time I ever ate rice by balling it up in my hand and dipping it in tomato sauce. He said, "This is where I live. It doesn't look like a Socialist house." It was quite a fancy house. He was not a poor man! I think he meant by that, we shouldn't think that he was trying to spread the wealth evenly among all the citizenry. He was quite happy with his comforts. I got to know him a bit, not with real depth, but I looked for those kinds of opportunities and just tried to learn everything I could about the society and how it worked.

There was an interesting event in Kuwaiti history that I spent some time on as a side issue, I guess more almost as a hobby. Kuwait was the first place on the Arabian peninsula that there was an elected representative body. In 1938 the ruler allowed elections from a small number of the electorate, which was only about 150 people. They elected a 12-member representative council. He was encouraged to do this by the British who were, of course, the people overseeing that part of the Gulf in those days. The 12-member council started asking difficult questions like, "Where is the money going?" "We'd like to see a budget." "We don't think all of these monopolies that you're giving to certain members of the community are justified." Six months later, the ruler dissolved this assembly, and the British backed him then, too. So they backed the establishment in July of '38, and they backed the dissolution in December of '38. It was a fascinating period of Kuwaiti history. Every Kuwaiti in 1968 and 67 and 66, every Kuwaiti knew where every other Kuwaiti family had stood on that issue. They were reluctant to talk about it. It was an example of a social division in the society that was still very sensitive. But I did a lot of research on it, and at one point I thought I might go back to school and do a Ph.D. dissertation on it, but I never did. After a lot of searching I acquired copies of Hussein Khazal's "Tarikh al-Kuwait as-Siyasi" (The Political History of Kuwait), a three-volume account, banned in Kuwait at that time, plus a little booklet titled "Nusf 'Am li Hukm Niabi fil Kuwait" ("Half a Year of Representative Government in Kuwait"), written by Khalid Adsani, the secretary to the elected council. In fact I got two sets of Khazal's books, and donated one set to the Middle East Institute library.

Q: I take it women weren't in the political process at all outside of mothers who told their sons what to do.

CECIL: They didn't vote, of course. They didn't hold office. But Kuwaiti women were certainly far more liberated and far more active professionally than Saudi women, for instance. But yes, there were limitations on their role. An interesting thing, going back to April Glaspie: April tried to get Arabic language training at FSI after her Kuwaiti assignment, and she was denied that opportunity and sent to Stockholm. I remember Howard Cottam writing a telegram to the Department, and I may not have the locations quite right, but he said in essence, "Sending April Glaspie to Stockholm is like sending Santa Claus to Riyadh." But the Department's attitude was that a woman Foreign Service Officer couldn't function effectively in the Arab world and so there was no point in giving them Arabic language training. She certainly proved even without the training that that wasn't true, and the access that she enjoyed in Kuwait was really incredible. I found this to be true in general throughout my... I had five assignments in the Arab world eventually. I found that most Arab men were fascinated by professional Western women and would love to talk to them and have them to their office, and if they could see them socially, they might try that, too. She could get an appointment with anyone at any time almost without exception. She had better luck getting doors open than the rest of us did, so it's just an interesting comment on women's roles. Foreign women, certainly, had easy access, and there were professional Kuwaiti women worth talking to who had opinions even though they didn't hold public office.

Q: I was a commercial officer in Dhahran at one point, and I found this fascinating because it gets you out, doing trade complaints and all that. Again, outside of the oil revenues, Kuwait was a trading place. This was a business, so in a way you were right in the heart of the activity. How did you find this when you were doing the commercial work?

CECIL: A lot of the work involved paper submissions back to Washington. I suppose there were a few trade complaints. I don't remember any in particular that stand out. We did lots of evaluations. I forget the form and the term that was used at the time, but we did lots of evaluations of local companies so that American countries would be able to buy a little background information on them.

We also reported trade opportunities if the government or the private sector was going to be inviting tenders. But the company reports I'm referring to were reports on the reliability and the financial stability of a company or an enterprise. We did a lot of that. I did meet a certain number of Kuwaiti businessmen, but I guess I would say that part of the work didn't excite me so much. I was more interested in the younger element of Kuwaiti society and more interested in some of the political issues. Certainly, though, there was a merchant community which had a lot of influence on the government. In fact, there were some families that said, "Well, we hired the Sabahs to run the country so that we can concentrate on business." The Sabahs didn't share that point of view. Nevertheless, we heard that more than once. I probably knew more about the business community back then than I have retained over the years.

Q: What about during that time, Iraq. I don't know whether Kassim was alive or dead, but what was Iraq doing in those days?

CECIL: The coup in Iraq took place during my tour. I'm not quite sure when that was. We regarded the Iraqi influence in Kuwait as a threat, of course, hostile to Kuwaiti interests and Kuwaiti independence. We were very used to hearing Iraqis claiming Kuwait as their territory. I didn't have any real contact with Iraqis myself. I suppose the ambassador must have been at least in occasional contact with his Iraqi counterparts, but I don't remember Iraqi diplomats crossing my path. When the War took place-the June '67 war-and Iraq broke relations with the United States, that, I guess, further estranged us, even if there was an Iraqi diplomatic community in Kuwait, they would certainly have had little contact with us after that. Personally, it impacted me just in kind of a minor way. I had planned a three-week trip by car through Iran. I was going to drive across the little 40-mile strip there of Southern Iraq where the Shat al-Arab comes out to the gulf, and I was going to spend three weeks going around Iran in my car. That was to be sometime in July or August, I forget which, but when the Iraqis broke relations with us, they wouldn't give me a visa to drive the forty miles across southern Iraq. I, unfortunately, never set foot in Iraq during my tour, never had gone up to Basra because it didn't seem in and of itself to be very attractive, so I don't have a lot of insights into the Iraqi role at the time. I know that later as I went down the Gulf, went to Saudi Arabia and then later served in Oman, we were always very suspicious of Iraqi activities down in the Gulf.

Q: What about Iran in that time? That must have been sort of the 800 lb. gorilla to the north or wasn't it? Northeast?

CECIL: I think that's probably the origin of the mistrust for the Shiite Kuwaiti community. The Sunnis were not convinced, I think, that the Shiites were fully loyal to Kuwait even though... I would say most of them were Arabs, but as I think back, the Kuwaitis often called them the Persians. A lot, of course, you recognized by their names. They have origins on the other side of the Gulf. Some of them were very prominent in the merchant community. My landlord, for instance, Muhammad Qabazard, was a Kuwaiti Shia. Originally his family had come from Iran. I think all of the countries on that side of the Gulf obviously dealt with Iran with great care, didn't want to provoke Iran. The question about Bahrain was very sensitive. The Iranian claim to Bahrain. There were, of course, other incidents later when they seized the islands of Abu Dhabi, Abu Musa, and the Tunbs. As you said, kind of like a gorilla in the room. They were careful not to offend the Iranians.

Q: There weren't any great threats or anything like that at that time?

CECIL: Not that I'm aware of. No.

Q: Were Iranian diplomats active, or were you aware of them?

CECIL: I wasn't. I didn't have any contact and no memories of Iranian diplomatic activity. I kind of wish I could go back and re-do that assignment knowing everything I learned later.

Q: I think of all those things. As I do these things, I keep replaying my career as I talk to people, thinking, "Oh, my God. Why didn't I do this or that?"

CECIL: There were certain formative experiences in Kuwait that I think helped me a lot later on through my years. It was a wonderful introduction to the Service. I began to learn something about representational skills. The DCM allowed me to hire his cook whenever I needed him, provided the DCM didn't need him, so I would hire the cook and entertain the young Kuwaitis at my house in the evening with simple meals. One of my responsibilities was labor reporting. As commercial officer, they gave me the labor portfolio as well because it involves some reporting, and they knew I liked that. We had a regional labor officer. I guess he was stationed in Beirut. I'm not positive; I think so. His name was John Conlon. He ended his career as ambassador to Fiji if I recall correctly. But anyway, John Conlon would come a couple of times a year. I remember him teaching me the usefulness, the utility, of finding the official down in the bowels of the ministry who is in charge of certain functions. He took me on one of his visits. We went into the Ministry of Labor, and we found the Kuwaiti official responsible for work permits. We were so far from the leadership of that ministry; they must have been on the eighth or tenth floor, and we were down around the third floor, somewhere inside the building. John found the guy whose job it was to issue the certificates or the certifications asserting that this skill was needed in Kuwait so that a foreigner could get a visa and a work permit. I remember that meeting with John Conlon just peppering this guy with questions, and he was quite free with his information. John said, "How many Egyptians? How many Jordanians? How many Palestinians? For what period of time? How do renewals work? What kinds of jobs?" and all those kinds of statistical and technical details. The Kuwaiti was totally unguarded and quite willing. He was kind of flattered to have two American diplomats calling on him. First time, I imagine, any diplomat had called on him. I don't remember now how we found him. I supposed John probably told me in advance, "Get the name of who it is that does this," and I guess I did the spade work. We went there, and I really came away from that impressed by this example of investigative reporting. The fact that I remember it today shows me how useful it can be to dig down inside, below the leadership of a ministry and find the person who's actually doing the work.

Q: In any bureaucracy, the people at the top really don't know the game as well as the people down below.

CECIL: Right. This is a good time to relate an incident that comes to mind that reveals a bit of the Foreign Service culture of the time. Over the Christmas holiday in 1967 I went to Egypt on vacation. My luggage didn't make it with me, and it was several days before it caught up with me. The airline had kept telling me "tomorrow, tomorrow" so I roughed it, went without shaving, and by the time I got my luggage I had a reasonable growth of beard. I decided to clean it up, keep it neat, and by the time I returned to Kuwait at the end of two weeks I had what I thought was a good-looking, well-trimmed beard. On the first morning back in the embassy the DCM and I were walking toward each other in the hallway. John Gatch looked up, seemed startled, and blurted out "Shave that beard!", but didn't stop to talk other than to congratulate me on a safe return. Before the day was over he came to my office. Speaking in a fatherly, confiding tone, he said he had had a brief talk with the ambassador, and he and the ambassador both thought I really should shave my beard. He told me that beards were not common in the Foreign Service, or words to that effect. Basically, I was intimidated. When I went home that day I shaved it. I didn't want to get off to a bad start in the Foreign Service. I rationalized to myself that it was an accidental thing anyway, springing from my lost luggage, and that I didn't attach much importance to it. In retrospect I marvel at that inward-looking, conservative attitude Gatch and Cottam expressed. About three years later, during my second year in Zanzibar, I decided to grow a beard again. No one said anything. I kept it about twelve years, through my assignments in Beirut, Jeddah, Washington, and Bamako, shaving it before going to Muscat. The Saudis told me-unknown to me when I adopted the style-that the Prophet had said that shaving the mustache (i.e., not having one), but cultivating the beard was a sign of a conservative Muslim. By the summer of 1983 the beard had begun to turn gray. I decided I didn't need to look any older than I already was, so I shaved it and never grew another one. I don't think having a beard for twelve years slowed down my progression through the Service, but of course I never worked again for Cottam or Gatch.

Q: Did the British have a special role in Kuwait? Were we working closely with the British? How did this work at the time?

CECIL: They certainly did. They had the historic role of being mentor, if you will, the guardian of the Emirates all down the Gulf. I'm not sure if it's fair to say their position was favored over ours, but I think probably it was just because of the history of the relationship. I had good relations with people at my age, my generation, in the British embassy, both their regular Foreign Service officers and one of their intelligence officers as well. We shared similar interests in getting to know young Kuwaitis better. I had excellent relations at my age level. I never had contact with the British ambassador or head of Chancery, but I know our DCM and our ambassador did all the time.

Q: At this point, you weren't married?

CECIL: No. That's a point we need to touch on. I met my wife in Kuwait. She came in September of '67 to teach in the American International School of Kuwait. She had graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in education, and she wanted to find some interesting overseas experience. She and her best friend were both looking for overseas teaching jobs. Someone in the career counseling office at the University of Iowa said, "Well, the superintendent of the American International School in Kuwait is an alumnus of the University of Iowa, so why don't you apply there?" They were also applying to the DOD school system for other opportunities. My wife told me that from DOD they got back form letters saying, "We've got your application. We'll review it. We'll be in touch." From Kuwait, they both got telegrams saying, "Kuwait wants you. Letter follows." With that kind of reaction, they both accepted jobs at the school. It was a small community; that is, the expatriate community. It didn't take me long to meet the new teachers that came in. As I say, that was September. As I approached the end of my assignment in July of the following year-July '68-we had to make a decision on what was going to happen to this relationship. We decided to get married. We were married in Kuwait in May of '68 in the Holy Family Cathedral in downtown Kuwait. That's how I met my wife. She's from Iowa from a farming family, and I'm sure most of her family were in that group of Americans who said, "Where? Where are you going? Where is that place?" Her mother came all the way from Iowa for the wedding, and we had a lot of Kuwaiti friends at the wedding as well. That's just a very special benefit from that assignment that I never would have expected I was going to leave with when I went there in '66.

Q: I think this is a good place to stop. I put at the end of the tape where we are, so we know when to pick it up. We'll pick this up the next time in 1968. Where did you go?

CECIL: I went back to Washington for Swahili and French language training. How I got that assignment is worth talking about. We could do it now in five minutes, maybe, because that's an interesting example of dealing with the Department's assignment system. I think there's a lesson to be drawn there as well. I asked the Department way in advance for Swahili language training and an assignment to East Africa which was the other part of the world that interested me. I got even more interested in Kuwait because of the historic ties between the Kuwaitis and all the Gulf Arabs with East Africa. The Department came back and said the Swahili class for next summer-summer of '68-was full, but they were going to give me Amharic language training and follow that with an assignment to Ethiopia. I knew from reading that if I took that language that I would be eventually required to spend four years in Ethiopia, probably in two different tours. Somehow or another that was the requirement back then. I really didn't want to study Amharic, and I really had no special interest in Ethiopia. I was far more interested in the Islamic part of Africa, and I really was interested by that time in learning Swahili as a tool. I wanted to acquire that. By pure coincidence, virtually almost the same day-it was certainly the same week-that I got the Department's regrets on Swahili language training I got a telegram from The Experiment in International Living. They had tracked me down. My group leader from the Nigeria summer had recommended me as someone who could be a group leader. The Experiment said they were going to open in the next few months their program in North Africa where they were going to be supervising the first exchange students in Arab universities in Rabat, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, and they needed a program supervisor. I would live in Libya, but I would be responsible for visiting Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco at least twice during the academic year to make sure the students who were placed were getting along OK, that they had proper housing and that their academic programs were satisfactory. This was a wonderful opportunity for me, so I turned that back to the Department. I said, "I've got this offer. It fits perfectly into my career pattern. It will give me a year to learn about North Africa. I can improve my Arabic. I can probably learn some French in the process, and a year from now you can put me in that Swahili course because you've got a whole year to plan!" I got an answer back very quickly saying, "We've looked again..." Oh, and of course, I was going to take a year's leave without pay. That was part of the package. I had to do that. Be without pay for a year. They came back and said, "We've looked again, and we've found a place for you in Swahili and, furthermore, we're going to give you French as well because we're going to assign you after that as political officer in Lubumbashi in Zaire, or maybe it was still Congo back then. They told me that there had never been a Swahili speaking FSO in Lubumbashi even though the community there was comprised of a large number of Swahili speakers-maybe as much as 30% or 35% spoke Swahili. The Department said that they had wanted to see if it was worth the expense of training an officer in Swahili and sending him to Lubumbashi. The course is six months long at FSI. It was wonderful. I said, "I'm delighted! Not only do I get Swahili, I get French as well, and I get into Africa. It's not Muslim Africa, but that's fine. I'll take that." That's what I left Kuwait heading to Washington to do. We can talk about the sequel and why I didn't go to Lubumbashi next time.

Q: Great!

Q: Today is the 26th of September 2006. Chuck, you said you had something you wanted to talk about Kuwait.

CECIL: I just realized that last time I don't believe that during our talk we touched on the point of alcohol and Kuwait, which was an issue for the diplomatic community there. The Kuwaitis had a nice, moderate, intermediate policy, I call it. Unlike the Saudis, they didn't ban alcohol totally. The Kuwaitis allowed the diplomatic corps to import alcohol. It was only the residents-the Kuwaitis and the Foreign Nationals-that were prohibited from buying or consuming alcohol. Obviously, this meant that the diplomatic corps was an object of great attention for non-diplomatic reasons, on the part of both the Kuwaiti community and the foreign community. We were always being hit up for bottles of scotch or gin or whatever. They would take anything, for that matter. Ambassador Cottam was very, very clear and, I guess you could say, rigid, though I don't think he ever had to apply the policy that he stated. He said that if he ever found any member of his staff selling or even giving away alcohol to non-diplomats that he would have them transferred out of Kuwait. I took that very seriously. After all, it was my first assignment, so I believed him. I didn't want to test it certainly. During the whole two years for me and, I'm sure, for many others, maybe everyone on the embassy staff, this was always an issue, and it always tested personal relationships and friendships because it was very difficult to say no to people that you developed close working relationships with, or personal relationships. I remember very clearly one evening about 6:00 in the evening a Kuwaiti came to my door. I lived in a little townhouse just down the road from the embassy off the embassy compound. This was a Kuwaiti I had gotten to know, and my fiancï¿½e at the time had gotten to know him because both he and my fiancï¿½e were graduates of the University of Iowa. He was a good friend, and he same to the door at six one evening alone and said, "Chuck, can you give me some scotch?" It was really awkward for me. It's very difficult to say no to an Arab because they find it very difficult to say no to you if you ask for something. If you want something and they really can't or don't want to do it, rather than say no, they'll just put a slow man on the job, and it may be hoped that the request will die with time. I had to tell him, "No, it's something I really wish I could do. I wish I could help you, but I would be sent home if I was ever caught doing that," and I couldn't do it. As far as I know, it didn't disrupt the friendship. We continued to be friends throughout the rest of my time there. In fact, he came to our wedding which was near the end of the tour, and when I came back to Kuwait some years later on a visit, he had me to his home for dinner. So I guess he probably wasn't expecting it, but he tried, and it put me in an awkward position.

Q: Do they have the equivalent that they had during my time in Saudi Arabia when I was in Dhahran where the people in Aramco made something called sidiki juice?

CECIL: The term was used there. The Americans and foreign expatriates in the Kuwait oil company or some of the other oil companies in business community, some did make it, I'm sure of it. In fact, I probably drank it on occasion. Terrible stuff! Not the sort of stuff you'd want to drink, so I didn't certainly consume much of that. Yes, it was made, and it was talked about. But there was a thriving black market in genuine stuff, and it was always said that some very prominent Kuwaitis were, in fact, managing the black market and getting rich of off it. In another case, because my fiancï¿½e and I decided to get married there in the Catholic Church I had a series of weekly meetings with the priest at the cathedral. As I mentioned earlier, although I had been baptized a Catholic, I had been raised a Methodist, and I needed to renew my understanding and familiarity with Catholic teaching. The priest was actually the bishop of Kuwait, a Spanish Basque priest about 60 years old or so, a rather rotund fellow. He gave me a little private session every week for two or three months, I guess, as we were moving toward the wedding. At one point he said to me, "Can you bring me some alcohol?" I said, "Well, I really am not supposed to, but in your case, I'll check with my ambassador and see if he would not object." I guess the ambassador thought well... I don't know what he thought, really. I guess he thought a priest can keep a secret, and it is, after all, the bishop, so he posed no objection. (Later I learned that the ambassador was supplying him with wine for the Mass, which I didn't know at the time.) I went back the next week and took him two of my best bottles of red wine, Chateauneuf du Pape. When he opened the little carrying bag that I had them in, he looked at them. He was obviously disappointed. He looked at me and he said, "Do you have any scotch?" After checking again with the ambassador, the following week I brought him one bottle of scotch. That was the only time I ever stepped over that line. I don't know what the situation is today in Kuwait, but certainly it was an ever-present element in our social relationships there. Because I was cultivating the younger crowd, many of whom had been educated in the States, they naturally were very westernized and very liberal in their tastes. But they were also most of them fairly well-to-do, so they got their alcohol through channels I know nothing about. Anyway, I thought that was worth mentioning.

Q: Let's talk about the language. You went to get Swahili and French. How did this work out?

CECIL: I think I explained the reasons how that happened in the last meeting we had. I came back to Washington, entered Swahili training at FSI in September. There were four of us, and it was a wonderful experience. Certainly, it was an intellectual experience. Dr. Earl Stevick was the linguist in charge of Swahili instruction in those days, and he probably was in charge of other things. Stevick was really in the forefront of language teaching methodology in the whole country. He was a nationally known authority on language teaching methodology. We were in a way his guinea pigs. He tried many of his methods on us. There were only four of us in the class. One simple rule was that you could never sit in the same seat around the table two days in a row. He just always wanted to keep an atmosphere of newness and wanted to avoid having us get into ruts and think, "Oh, well. Fred always gets the first one and I get the second one, so I don't have to listen to the first one when doing exercises." We never had that. We always were on our toes. That was a very enjoyable six months. With me in that group of four was Charles Dawson who was going to Dar Es-Salaam to be the Cultural Affairs Officer for USIA, and David Halsted who was on his way to Kampala, I think as Economic- Commercial officer. And Fred Wettering was the fourth. A good six months. I finished Swahili on a Friday. On Monday I started French, and I had only studied French in high school, so I had a smattering of it, but I always wanted to learn it. I found that equally enjoyable. I was in a nice group. There were six of us. Not the same six throughout the whole period, but we moved along very fast because we were all highly motivated. I think maybe all of us had some previous introduction to the language. Sometime during the third month, AF/EX called me and said, "The person we had lined up to go to Zanzibar as Political Officer is unable to go." I think it was for medical reasons, but I don't know the person or the reason. They said, "So we would like to send you to Zanzibar instead." It was initially a disappointment because at that point I had nine months invested in reading and learning about Zaire, the Congo. I had met every Congolese in town I could. But really, I was also quite attracted by the idea of going to Zanzibar because of its historic ties to the Persian Gulf. So that was fine. I said to FSI, "Really, it doesn't make much sense for me to keep studying French." I had a good month remaining. I said, "Why not just let me take the exam in French." I did that. They gave me a 3/3. Probably very generous to get that in three months. The course in those days was only four months, so it wasn't six months the way it is now. That was true of the other common European languages. So for the fourth month, they gave me a one-on-one Swahili instructor, and I further improved in that. We were off to Zanzibar in the summertime. I think it was probably July.ZANZIBAR

Q: But you weren't able to get any other language training?

CECIL: My wife attended the French class with me because that's what we knew would be needed in Lubumbashi, and we figured Swahili was an extra-an experiment-so she didn't study Swahili. Unfortunately, it turned out to be that the French was of no use in Zanzibar, and Swahili was absolutely essential. Once we got to post, she studied in the post language program and certainly did acquire enough knowledge to engage in social exchanges and do the shopping and that sort of thing, but it is unfortunate that we hadn't known at the beginning or she would have taken the whole course. We arrived in Dar Es Salaam the night Apollo 11 landed on the moon. I forget what day that was in July of '69, but that's when it was. Our friend Charles Dawson had arrived in Dar a short time ahead of us as CAO, and so as soon as we left our bags in the hotel from the airport, we went immediately to the American library-maybe they called it the cultural center-and Charles was there with a radio link to the Voice of America, and we were listening to the commentary and the actual landing on the moon. The center was full of excited Tanzanians. It was a wonderful, exuberant atmosphere. We spent three days in Dar. Tom Pickering was the DCM at that point. He and Alice had us to lunch. Very nice of them to take the time to have a second- tour officer to lunch. He had served in Zanzibar immediately before and had done so well there that the ambassador had brought him over to Dar to be his DCM. We went over to Zanzibar, and at that point Jack Matlock was the principal officer in Zanzibar, and he was just getting ready to go relieve Tom as DCM in Dar Es-Salaam. We really had two stars of the Foreign Service passing through Zanzibar and Dar Es-Salaam. I was really fortunate to be able to have some contact and association with them which continued for many years, actually. They were wonderful examples to emulate.

CECIL: That brings to mind a little story about Tom Pickering and his fantastic memory. Jack Matlock told a story about traveling up country in Tanzania with Tom. They drove across Tanzania, and this particular incident took place at Kigoma at the end of the road and also the end of the railroad from Dar es Salaam over on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Jack just said that Tom during the day when they would call on people never took notes.

They had a meeting that day with the head of the Kigoma office of the Tanzanian railroad and asked him lots of questions about the freight that the railroad carried and the labor problems and economic issues and what did they bring up from Dar es Salaam, and what did they ship back to Dar es Salaam. Then what happened to lake boat traffic. How much of the freight went north to Burundi and how much went south to southern Tanzania or on to Zambia. They had a very nice conversation full of economic facts and figures, and Tom never took a note. Jack said that it was always this way. But in the evening when they went back to their hotel room Tom would then sit down at a desk and write it all down. He just had this incredible memory. He didn't take notes during meetings. It's probably Jack's story that convinced me to follow the same practice during my own career. If the official sees you writing furiously, he's less likely to talk freely. I've always believed that you should absolutely minimize your note-taking with a government official, especially when it's on a sensitive topic. Anyway, it's just one of the many stories I've heard about Tom's fabulous memory. Unfortunately I didn't have a memory as good as Tom's.

Jack probably moved over to Dar I'm guessing within a month of my arrival in Zanzibar, and his #2, Don Haught, who had been the Political Officer, moved up then to be the principal officer, and I came in to take his job as Political Officer. I guess Tom probably only spent a year as DCM in Dar, but I'm not positive, but Jack Matlock only spent a year as DCM. I'm sure of that because sometime near the middle of my tour, Paul Kreisberg came to Dar Es Salaam to be DCM. I know he was DCM for, I'm sure, a year. That made very good sense because at that time the Chinese were building the Tanzam Railway from Dar Es-Salaam to Lusaka, Zambia. Washington and the West were so concerned about the inroads being made in East Africa by the Chinese. We, of course, responded to the Tanzam Railway by building a highway almost parallel to the railroad. Paul Kreisberg was a China expert, and so sending him to Dar Es-Salaam as DCM probably made some sense in Washington's eyes. As it happened, it was during his time in Dar Es-Salaam that Nixon made his trip to China. I remember arriving one day in Dar with the pouch. We carried the pouch from Zanzibar over once a week, and we took turns doing that. I remember walking into Paul's office and basically, his head was in his hands and he looked very despondent. He said to me, "I thought it was perfectly safe to leave Washington and come to Africa. I didn't think anything was going to happen in our relationship with China. Now look at this! Here I am in Dar Es-Salaam!" He obviously felt out of the action. I guess after Dar he probably went back to Washington. I don't know his assignment history.

We were very concerned about Communist in-roads, both Chinese and East German and Soviet in East Africa at the time. There were five consulates on Zanzibar when I arrived in July of '69. There was ours, there was the French because there was a large community of Comorians who had immigrated to Zanzibar mostly to look for work, and there were enough of them with some claim to French protection that the French felt the need to have a consulate there. Then the other three were the Soviet, the Communist Chinese, and the East Germans. Zanzibar was a real police state. I think it met all of the classical criteria of a Communist police state although, perhaps, they weren't genuinely Communist, but they certainly were very Leftist and following very Socialist policies. The East Germans had about 40 advisors in the Zanzibar Security Service, teaching and managing all of their security and surveillance activities. We were under constant surveillance. Our phones were tapped, and we knew that. After I left the post in the summer of '71, the consulate was replacing some furniture in our house, and when they took the sofa from our living room to the warehouse, they found a microphone planted under the base of the sofa. I think the opinion was-I'm not an expert on this-it was probably of East German manufacture. Who knows how it got there? We had a nanny, but she was an elderly South African lady, and I don't think she would have done that. We also had a cook. Or it could have been someone who broke into the house, perhaps, and placed it there. We don't know how it got there, but that was evidence of the kind of surveillance we were subjected to.

Q: The East German specialty all over the developed world was setting up police apparatus or apparati.

CECIL: They did that, certainly, in Zanzibar. That was their forte. The Chinese were into agricultural assistance projects. I think they provided some trainers for the Zanzibar military. We had no contact whatsoever with the Chinese. If the Zanzibari government hosted a function and we were all invited, it was what you read about in the books. The Chinese would just look right past us. They wouldn't see us. They wouldn't shake our hand. They wouldn't acknowledge our presence. So we pretty much responded in kind. We talked to the Soviets. No problem there, and while we might occasionally speak to an East German, really there wasn't much contact there, either. The East Germans had had a defector sometime prior to our arrival, one or two years, I think, before our arrival. Someone from Zanzibar had defected to the U. S., so they were extremely sensitive about any contact with us. The staff of the consulate consisted of the principal officer, myself as political officer, an agency representative who was there as the commercial officer. When I arrived, we had an administrative officer. After a year, in a staff reduction program, that position was eliminated, and I assumed the duties of Admin Officer as well as Political Officer, and I was also the vice-consul although we had almost no consular work. Then we had a secretary to the Principal Officer who also handled the State Department communications, and the agency had the real communications there, so they had one of their people to staff that function. We, in fact, piggybacked on their communications facilities to transmit our own material out of Zanzibar. That was it. We were all married except for the principal officer's secretary. She was a single lady. The principal officer had five children. I'm talking about Don Haught. Jack Matlock before him I think had three or four children. I know in the case of Don Haught, those of his children who were of school age actually went to a Zanzibari school for at least a couple of hours a day. It was more for social reasons. The Haughts wanted their kids to have some contact with the local children, and they learned good Swahili doing that. The whole American community was just the consulate, and probably we were about...nine adults or eleven adults, something like that, and a handful of children. The other expatriate community consisted of two British fellows who worked for... In the Gulf it's called Gray & Mackenzie, and in East Africa I think it was called Smith Mackenzie, and they ran the port for the Zanzibaris. There was an East African community organization called EAMFRO: East African Marine Fisheries Research Organization. It had a small number of expatriates, maybe five professionals, one of whom was a Brit. I think his specialty was oceanography, or maybe he was a marine biologist, something like that. They were a young couple. He had a wife. They were a young couple our age. There was another British couple probably in their 50's that had been long-time residents, and that was basically the foreign community. The French consul was there with his Chinese wife, and he had a deputy, a young Frenchman. That was the Western community on Zanzibar.

Q: What was our interest in that time in Zanzibar?

CECIL: Washington was extremely interested in any evidence of Chinese military presence. Newsweek magazine reported that the Chinese were building a missile-launching facility on the site of the former Mercury tracking station, a vestige of our early space program. We could drive by the Mercury Tracking Station site. We knew there was nothing to the story. But that's the kind of rumor that kept Washington's attention focused on East Africa. People were very concerned, apparently, in the State Department about the state of the union between Zanzibar and Tanganyika, the mainland. The British gave Zanzibar its independence in December of 1963. The British were very short-sighted in what they did. When the British arrived in East Africa perhaps a hundred years earlier, they found an Arab government in control of Zanzibar. Those Arabs, of course, had come from Oman, and made Zanzibar a part of their empire. The population of Zanzibar and Pemba was about 250,000. Of those, about 50,000 were Arab, and 200,000 were African, but the British seemed to ignore that, and when they decided to leave Zanzibar, rather than handing power over to a government elected by the majority, they turned the power back to the Arabs that they had found in control when they arrived a hundred years earlier. So that government lasted one month, and in January of 1964 there was a bloody revolution. The Arab sultan fled, and a small group of basically uneducated Zanzibaris seized power. They captured the government armory which had a lot of rifles in it, and in the course of 24 hours or less, the Arabs were gone and the Africans were in charge. They were immediately recognized by several of the Communist powers, and they turned to them both for political and economic support. This was a great alarm to Washington. Three months later in April of '64, Zanzibar joined with Tanganyika to form the nation of Tanzania. Zanzibar maintained a tremendous amount of autonomy in many areas. They had their own military; they had their own foreign affairs ministry; they controlled their own customs and immigration; they had their own budget. The government was a 32-member body called the Revolutionary Council. It was headed by Abeid Amani Karume, who had been a merchant marine seaman most of his life before he entered politics. He had a few years of education, possibly as many as six years of primary education, but was not a very well educated man. He would often give speeches on Saturday to the people. Our job in the consulate was to record those speeches and then translate them and see what he was saying about Zanzibar's intentions either to depart from the union or stick with the union, or whatever initiative he might be announcing. If we didn't have our report in to the embassy by noon on Monday, the embassy would be on the phone saying, "What happened Saturday? What did he say? What's he going to do now? What new threat?" We would record these things that were usually Saturday morning or Saturday afternoon. We would then spend some more hours on Saturday making sure we understood them. Sunday we would make sure we finished up the job, usually would write our cable summary over to Dar and get it out first thing Monday morning. Some years later, both Don Haught and I were in Washington at the same time when a new Principal Officer was getting ready to go out. I've forgotten his name, but I remember we had a drink with him at a hotel in town. We had a nice hour-long talk about the situation there, and his last question of Don was, "Well, if you were like me, and if you were going out next week, and if you knew everything at the beginning of your tour that you know now having finished your tour, is there anything you would do differently? Don said, "Yes. I'd spend a lot more time on the consulate boat." We were very serious about our work, and when you look back, you kind of wonder what made it seem so important.

Q: I was wondering. You can have someone making speeches, but did anything come out of these speeches?

CECIL: The people were certainly impressed. The Zanzibaris feared that we, the United States, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Oman, would overthrow the African government and restore the Arab Sultan to his rule. This is one reason we were always regarded with suspicion and why we were shadowed so assiduously by the Zanzibaris. They really feared that we were a threat to their continued existence. Why they left us there is maybe harder to understand, but we gave small amounts of assistance. AID built a vocational training school called the Mbweni Technical College which was dedicated during my first year there. They were playing both sides of the street, but we didn't put much into the game. There was that. There was a scandal which got some international attention. I think it probably was called The Persian Brides affair. At one point, there were a number of young ladies who were of Iranian or perhaps Pakistani descent. There was certainly a sizeable Ithnasheri Muslim community who traced their origins back to Pakistan. There was a smaller Zoroastrian community that traced their lines back to Iran. Members of the revolutionary council decided they would marry these young ladies. They wanted to take a step toward abolishing these ethnic communal lines. They wanted to integrate all the communities, and their contribution to this would be to marry about half a dozen of these young Persian girls as they were called. That sort of thing got some international attention. We, of course, were asked to state our abhorrence with this, but not that it had any effect. The real benefit of being there, I guess, was just to be as well informed as we could be about Communist activities in that part of the world. We were like Kremlinologists. There was very little public information available. There was a weekly newspaper published in Swahili which we read very carefully, and we would find a tiny little item. Maybe somebody was promoted, or maybe somebody was transferred, or maybe somebody visited that we didn't know about, and we would glean little pieces of information from the weekly paper and from what meetings we could have, and try to put it into a meaningful picture. It was a wonderful intellectual challenge. So interesting! The paper was called Ukweli Ukidhihiri Uwongo Hujitenga. It means, "Truth prevails where lies must vanish." That was the weekly party paper. I got to know the editor of the paper. I got to know the director of the Zanzibar Broadcasting Company. One of my extra duties in addition to being Political Officer was to be the branch Public Affairs Officer. We had a USIS library, a separate facility in a different location from the consulate. It was the only public lending library on the island. The East Germans had a reading room, but they wouldn't let you borrow the books. USIA had had a branch PAO resident on Zanzibar, a fellow named-the last one-Barney Coleman, a Black American whom I understood spoke very good Swahili and was very sociable and made a lot of friends and made the Zanzibari government very uneasy, so they PNGed him. They kicked him out. When they did that, USIA decided not to staff the position again, so the political officer took over running the library and managing the small staff. I think we had five people-five staff members-counting the janitor. We had three librarians, a janitor, and a guard, I believe it was. I loved that. It was my first exposure to USIA materials, and I found how useful they could be to a Political Officer, especially in a hostile environment. Zanzibaris in general were afraid to receive us in their offices because the very fact of doing that might bring their loyalties into suspicion, or they would at least have to explain why did that American come and see you. Why did you give him an appointment? I found that USIS materials were very useful in creating reasons to ask for appointments to go see people. I gave them maps; I gave them new books that we received; I opened a music room in the library that we could invite Zanzibaris to come and listen to records. I think it was records in those days. I don't think we had gotten to audio tapes yet. I often went to see people to give them either copies of Topic magazine which was the Africa publication of USIA in those days. Whatever I could find to create a reason to go see someone. That's how I got to know some of the people in the media. We offered the director of the broadcasting station an international visitor grant. That was just about the time I was leaving. He accepted. I'm a little vague as to whether the government let him go. I can't recall because I think the actual trip, I believe, was after my departure. It showed me something that I think I benefited from throughout my career, and that was how useful USIA materials and resources can be to a Political Officer. I never forgot that. I always urged everyone to bring USIA as much into our work as possible wherever I was throughout the rest of my career. It was a great shame to see the agency closed.

Q: Absolutely. What was the influence, if any, of Julius Nyerere and the mainland portion of Tanzania?

CECIL: It's hard for me to say after all these years. Certainly Nyerere must have been very frustrated by the relationship because I think my impression is that he was basically an honest man with good motivation. Maybe, I think, he was unwise in the Socialist policies that he applied on the mainland. Certainly they did not benefit the economy or the average Tanzanian, but I think he probably wanted to do the right thing. Of course, he was a very well educated man. He had translated Shakespeare's Julius Caesar into Swahili as well as The Merchant of Venice. I think Karume and the actions of the revolutionary council must have been a constant thorn in his side. I guess he thought that he was moderating their extremist behavior by trying to maintain the union, and, of course, the union did last. It's still there today. But I think you need an academician to assess what his influence really was.

Q: Was there much backwards and forwards between the two places by the natives of Tanzania?

CECIL: You mean immigration, that sort of thing?

Q: No. Traveling back and forth.

CECIL: The Zanzibaris certainly controlled immigration in both directions very closely. I guess there was some commercial travel. Businessmen probably could go back and forth. I don't think I know any statistics on it. I think the general rule would be if you wanted to go to mainland, you had to get the approval of some official. Very carefully controlling that sort of thing, and vice versa. There was some boat traffic to the mainland, not much. Dhows could go. I guess there were probably some larger vessels that could go back and forth. Our link was East African Airways. We had a little plane called a Twin Otter, Canadian-built Twin Otter that held sixteen people: five rows of three and one seat in the tail sideways. So sixteen passengers plus the pilot and co-pilot. That flew twice a day. There was a morning flight and an evening flight, so we could fly over in the morning, go to the embassy with the pouch, or go shopping if we needed to, and fly back in the late afternoon. That plane had been put into service not too long before our arrival. I'm not sure whether it was in '69, maybe '68 or '67, but people still talked about its predecessor. Its predecessor was described to me... I never saw the plane, but it was described to me as a canvas-covered bi-plane which all the expatriates referred to as the "Bamboo Bomber," and it carried seven people. Seven passengers, I should say, plus the pilot and co-pilot. When you checked into the airport in Dar Es- Salaam, not only did they weigh your luggage, they weighed you, and if the passengers were a little heavier than average, it would only take six people. Everyone was still saying when we were there, "And if the Dutch consul went, it only took five." I'm glad we didn't have to rely on that! The local people, I think, usually went by boat. I'm not very well informed, actually, about those methods.

Q: Did you have Zanzibaris in for dinner or that sort of thing?

CECIL: It was very difficult for the same reason they didn't want to receive us in their office. If they came to our house, they were then subsequently questioned by the security service. They had to have reasons for coming. I made really serious efforts, exerted as much effort as I could. I used USIS movies, for instance, to have movie showings at our house, sometimes on the front lawn with a portable screen. Sometimes I could get people to come to those, but there were very few who would come. We probably never had what you would call a normal sit-down representational dinner or lunch with Zanzibaris present in the house. We had some of these movie showings. We would have snacks, hors d'oeuvres, outside, even little, it was called mishkaki, little shish kabobs on skewers, outside. To get them inside the house was very unusual. I learned something from our chief of station there, another lesson that I carried throughout my career. I argued at one point that we should make an effort to get to know the Zanzibari members of the security service, some of these people we recognized because we saw them so often where we happened to be. We knew they were following us or watching us. I said, "You know, we should get to know them personally, and maybe they'll be open to some new ideas or maybe they'll be less critical of the United States if they just get to know a little more about us." In looking back, I suppose I was naive about that. The chief of station said to me, "You know, people in the security business and the intelligence business are paid to report. If they don't have anything to report, they'll fabricate it because they want that pay. They want that extra little dash, the little tip, the bonus, the payment they're going to get for turning in some report. If they do come to our houses, their reports will look and sound even more convincing just because they'll be able to describe their surroundings better or they'll know a little bit more about it. They'll say, 'Chuck Cecil doesn't drink gin, but he loves vodka," or something like that. Any little tidbit." I took that lesson to heart, and I certainly noticed throughout my career later that our own intelligence service seemed to be afflicted by some of these kinds of things. I've read reports later in my career that such-and-such a head of state is mortally ill and his days or weeks or months are limited and these people are still around today.

Q: I know.

CECIL: I think my friend was correct, and we didn't make a big effort. He convinced me it wasn't the right thing to do, and we probably wouldn't have had much success anyway.

Q: Were there any Soviet military ship visits to Zanzibar while you were there?

CECIL: No. Nothing of that nature. I don't recall any particular Soviet activity. I think the Soviets looked upon an assignment to Zanzibar as a real outpost that is almost vanishing from the real life of their foreign service. I don't think they enjoyed it very much. They had a pretty low profile. There were some other aspects of life there that are worth mentioning. For instance, we had a lovely house at the end of the road above a beach, but in those days many Foreign Service houses were not provided washing machines or clothes dryers. Zanzibar was provided with clothes driers because of the Tumbu fly which plants its eggs in damp clothing if you hang it up on a clothes line and then the larvae will bore into you and come out later as a tiny worm. That was supposedly the justification for our being allowed to have clothes dryers. Both the clothes dryer and the clothes washing machine were outside the house, though. They were in a covered area outside the kitchen. It was an old wringer washer. I remember my wife forcing the clothes through that wringer. I'm glad she was an Iowa farm girl and had some familiarity with those kinds of conditions. It was a different stage in Foreign Service support and amenities. In fact, that leads me to another thought about Foreign Service support. We had our first child during that assignment to Zanzibar. The only hospital on the island was the V. I. Lenin Hospital run and staffed by the Communist Chinese. Washington, first of all, would not allow us to use the hospital but, at the same time, the Chinese would not treat us. Jack Matlock told me of a case in which an American tourist riding a bicycle had been hit by a car. I'm not sure if it was Jack personally or another member of the consulate who took him to the hospital because he needed some treatment. The Chinese, according to Jack, measured the wound but wouldn't give him any stitches. Jack took him home to the principal officer's residence, and he spent a day or so there before he was able to travel back to the mainland to Dar Es-Salaam. It was a very minimal medical facility. The next alternative... Well, let me say, there was a private Indian lady doctor on the island, Dr. Talati was her name. Some time during our tour, the Zanzibar government forbade private medical practice. Dr. Talati wasn't the only doctor. There were a few others, mainly in the Asian community, but they put them all out of business saying they were exploiting the people by taking money for their services. So, Dr. Talati was not able to openly practice medicine by the end of our tour. I remember going to her office once. It was a dark facility in an old, old building in Stone Town. Above the entrance was a sign that said, "Dr. Talati. Licensed to sell drugs and poisons." She was nice, but she couldn't help with the birth of a child. Dar Es-Salaam was the next recourse. The hospital there had no incubators, and if I recall correctly, no ability to do a blood transfusion for a baby. So that was not an option. We determined that my wife would have to go to Nairobi to have our first child. In those days giving birth was not accepted as a reason for medical evacuation. The law according to the department was that medevacs were for illness or injury, and pregnancy was not an illness or an injury. My wife went to Nairobi about a month before the due date-maybe it was three weeks-and it was explained to us that the embassy in Nairobi had two transit apartments that were at that time unoccupied and that my wife could have one of them at no charge. But if a real medevac should come to Nairobi from anywhere in East Africa and would need the apartment, then she would have to go to a hotel at our own expense. We were lucky, and she was able to spend the entire three weeks in that apartment without having to go to the hotel. Our first son Thomas was born in Nairobi in September 1970 on the day Gamal Abdel Nasser died. My wife went to a British hospital. I've forgotten the name of it, but it was up on the hill above the Hotel Africa somewhere not far from central Nairobi. Nice British and African nuns ran the hospital. A midwife assisted at the birth. I'm not sure if a doctor even showed up. I can't recall that. They wouldn't let me near the room where the birth was taking place. Their normal requirement was to keep the mother in the hospital for ten days before allowing her to go home. In our case they made a special exception because of airplane schedules. There was a plane back to Zanzibar on the ninth day after the birth, and they said, "Well, OK. We don't see any problems, so we'll let you go a day early. It's not our usual practice, but you can go home." We flew back to Zanzibar with our nine-day-old son.

There's another example of how a good Administrative Officer can help make up for a weakness in practice and regulation. The Admin Officer in Dad Es Salaam was Andrew Coe. Andy Coe. He sent the embassy nurse to Zanzibar to give our son and Jean the injections-the inoculations-that were required so my wife and nine-day old baby didn't have to fly over to Dar Es-Salaam. Even as the baby got a little bit older, Andy had the nurse come over and see us in Zanzibar. It was very nice of him. In fact, another example: One day not long after the birth, my wife's very good friend who had been teaching with her in Kuwait was taking advantage of our presence in Zanzibar to pay us a visit, and she came. One day my wife was taking her friend down through Stone Town, and they went into an Indian merchant's store room, and my wife stepped on a nail. And so, tetanus shot. The private doctors were out of practice at that point, and the island hospital was off limits. As it happened, the next day it was time to take the pouch to Dar Es-Salaam, and it was Don Haught's time. He went over in the morning. The nurse gave him lessons on a grapefruit on how to give a shot and then gave Don the serum. Don came back on the evening flight and came to our house and gave my wife the tetanus shot. We took a picture of it and sent it in to State Magazine, and they published it. I think the caption was, "All in a day's work for the principal officer of Zanzibar." It was a nice supportive community that we were in there. Dar Es-Salaam always was concerned about our welfare and did everything they could.

Q: Were you using your Swahili very much?

CECIL: Absolutely. It was essential. We had an excellent instructor, Sheik Ali Omar. He was a retired headmaster in the Zanzibar school system, African, and a wonderful teacher. I can't remember now whether I had a lesson from him every day, but probably three days a week for an hour. We couldn't do our work without Swahili. Everything was in Swahili. Still to this day it's still the language I scored highest in at FSI. I got a 4 in Swahili in reading. Earl Stevick didn't give me a 4 for speaking; he gave me a 3+ plus and said I didn't quite have the variety of vocabulary that he would like to have seen to give me an S4, but we certainly used it every day.

Another point or two about the quality of life in Zanzibar about that time might be worth making. One was we had a consumables allowance to pay the shipment of consumables that were not available on the local economy. Our practice was to order through Peter Justesen in Denmark about twice a year. I think our allowance was about 2,000 pounds, if I recall. That was a one-time allowance, so we divided it up by, I think, two shipments, maybe possibly into three. That's where we got our processed foods-canned foods-that weren't available. In Zanzibar there were state-run shops where an extremely limited number of items could be bought. I remember one thing that was always on the shelf was canned pineapple. There was wonderful fresh pineapple on the market, but canned pineapple on the shelves. And processed canned cheese. I think it was Australian. And sometimes these would be the only two items you could find in a government store. One merchant in the market in Zanzibar in Stone Town had government permission to import potatoes from the mainland, and once a week, an airplane brought in a supply of potatoes, but if you weren't down there early enough, the East Germans would buy up all the potatoes before the other expatriates could get them. We had an arrangement with a farm on the mainland near the town of Iringa which is quite a ways inland in Tanzania. It was called the Iringa Basket. Every other week this farm would pack up a huge African basket made out of grass and bamboo or whatever the material was, tie it all up, fill it with whatever vegetables were current that week, and send it off to Zanzibar. We paid 70 shillings for the basket. I think in those days there were seven shillings to the dollar. That's incredible if you think what the shilling is worth today, or maybe they aren't even using them anymore. Anyway, about $10.00, and that included the air fare. So the principal officer's family and my wife and I shared an Iringa basket every two weeks, and that's how we got the variety in our diet in the way of vegetables. Zanzibar is very rich in fruits but very poor in vegetables. The staple there is manioc or cassava. That's the starch in the diet. For some reason they didn't take much to cultivating vegetables, but we had wonderful, wonderful fruits and many of them I had never seen before; things like mangosteens and what we called custard apples. I think these probably have other names depending on what part of the world you're from. And duriani. I guess it's called durian. I still call it by the Swahili name I first learned. That very spiked, huge thing about the size of a small football, and it smells to high heaven. It's regarded as an aphrodisiac in Southeast Asia. But that was available there. And jack fruit. And, of course, so many varieties of bananas. I had no idea there were so many different kinds of bananas. And mangoes. Many different kinds of mangoes. They had wonderful fruits but almost no vegetables. As far as quality of life, maybe that covers those high points. I did do some writing for the outside world while I was there. I published an article in the Journal of Modern Africa Studies shortly after leaving Zanzibar. It was called, "Zanzibar: The Politics of Revolutionary Inequality." It appeared in the Journal of Modern Africa Studies Volume 9, Number 4. That was sometime after June of '71 because that's when we left. June or July. I think it was probably early '72. It was kind of a George Orwellian type of thing showing that despite all the high sounding principals that this revolutionary council had said it was going to implement, in fact, it was like Animal Farm. The revolutionary council members had all the privileges and the high lifestyle, and the people were being totally exploited and neglected. I published that article under the name George W. Triplett. I had an ancestor named George Washington Triplett, and basically I didn't want to delay publication by going through the formal procedures to get the Department's approval which we were supposed to do if I published it under my own name. So I published it under a pseudonym and tried to let the outside world know what was happening in Zanzibar in those days. I had done that earlier, actually, with another article called, "America's Stakes in the Middle East" which I published in The SAIS Review in 1969 after coming back from Kuwait. I also published that as George W. Triplett. Just a general review of our Middle East policy with which I did not agree at the time. I guess those are the only two cases, though, where I published things under pseudonyms.

CECIL: I did write one other thing. As the assignment was coming to an end, I wrote a memo to the embassy in Dar recommending that we close the consulate and that we take those resources and open a consulate-or an embassy it would have been actually-in the Comoros. The argument was that we're having no influence here in Zanzibar on the course of events. We have very little access despite our best efforts, so why not transfer our resources and our people to the Comoros where we might influence the development of a nation that was just about to be given its independence by the French? We didn't do that, of course. We didn't open in the Comoros. We did eventually close in Zanzibar. I know there were, I believe, two, maybe three, other principal officers after Don Haught, before it closed in 1979. It was the first consulate opened in Africa. It had opened in 1837, so it had a long history. It wasn't open all those years. It was closed in 1915, when we transferred our representation to Mombasa, and then reopened in1961 as independence was approaching. I don't know what the embassy thought of my memo, but it's just one of those things. I always think about other possibilities, and certainly it was difficult to have influence on the island at that time. We had two CODELs (Congressional Delegation) while I was there. The first was a visit of a few hours by Congressman Charles Diggs. Then we had three senators visit for a total of five hours: Senator Moss, I think he was from Utah; Senator McGee, I think he might have been from Wyoming; and Senator Fong from Hawaii. They came with their wives and with a couple of staff members. We had a nice lunch for them and gave them a tour of Stone Town and maybe a couple of other things, and I guess they learned something about the complexity of the situation in East Africa. I did have a CODEL in Kuwait: Congressman Tunney, my congressman in California by coincidence, came to Kuwait during my time there, but the Zanzibar ones were probably the second and third CODELs I had in my career. It was very interesting to get to meet and talk to senators and try to educate them and influence their thinking a little bit. My favorite story about Senator Fong is that sometime after that visit, I noticed his name in the paper when he joined with two other senators, it was Senator Long from Louisiana, and Senator Spong, I think was from Virginia, I believe. The three of them decided that something had to be done about the unjustifiable pirating of musical intellectual property from American companies by Chinese publishers who were copying the lyrics and publishing them and then paying absolutely nothing to the American composers and writers and publishers. That bill when introduced was called the "Long Fong Spong Hong Kong Song Bill."

[laughter]

CECIL: But I don't think it ever passed.

Q: Today is the 23rd of November 2007. We've had quite a hiatus, but we're back at it again. Chuck, you've left Tanzania, and you went to Beirut....

So let's start with some "quality of life" issues.

Q: You were taking Arabic from what, '71 to...

CECIL: Seventy three. Sixteen months, September '71 to January '73. Lebanon was calm in those days. It was an idyllic place, no hints of a civil war. That happened after I left, but it was a calm period, and we enjoyed our time there.

We left Zanzibar in the summer of 1971; I believe it was July. We had home leave and then showed up in Beirut on the 13th of September 1971. Our household effects arrived in Beirut five and a half months after we left Zanzibar. They went the long way around Africa or something. They came just ten days before Christmas in '71.

I was assigned to our Foreign Service Institute field school for Arabic language training. The second year of Arabic in those days was in our embassy in Beirut, the building that was subsequently demolished in a bombing. Because I had got myself tested in Arabic after my Kuwait assignment and got an S2/R1+ from my work in the post language program, Washington decided that I didn't need that first year in Washington at FSI, so they assigned me directly to Beirut for the second year. I have always regretted that I had been tested after Kuwait because I would have preferred to have the full 22 months course. In any case, I went straight to Beirut and I was there from 13 September '71 until January of '73, so I had about 15 months study there at FSI.

Beirut provides another example of Foreign Service life and administrative support, an example of how things have changed over the years. Beirut was the only post I ever served at of my nine posts where we were given a housing allowance and sent out to find our own accommodations. Every other post I served in I was assigned housing. We found a very nice apartment in the area of Beirut called Ramlat al-Beida, maybe a 20 to 30 minute bus ride from the embassy which is how used to go to work. It was a four bedroom unfurnished apartment without air conditioning, but the embassy provided window units for us.

It was an eight story apartment building owned by a Saudi citizen, but he was from the Hadramaut in Yemen. Salem Bah Mihriz was his name. He and his family lived on the top two floors, the seventh and eighth floors, a penthouse arrangement, but the other six floors were all rented by American Embassy families, so we felt like a small, mutually-supportive community. Each apartment occupied a full floor. It was very nice. It was across the street from a marble factory. They started their diamond saws at 5:00 a.m. every morning, so it would assure that we would be up early and on our way to work. Our building overlooked a Palestinian refugee camp in an open area next door.

We arrived with our son Thomas. When we arrived in September, Thomas was almost one year old. When we found our apartment and asked for the embassy to furnish it, they did give us the basic furniture and appliances, but they didn't provide a baby crib. That surprised us because in Zanzibar the embassy in Dar Es Salaam had sent a baby crib over to us for the first nine months there. So I inquired. I said, "We do need a baby crib." I was told by the GSO, "Oh, no. We don't provide baby cribs. It's not allowed. You'll have to go buy your own baby crib." Because we needed a quick solution, in the end that's what we did. We bought our baby crib for our one-year-old. With another child soon on the way, I pursued this issue. The GSO bucked it up to the admin officer, and the admin officer reaffirmed that it was not allowed to provide baby cribs as part of the furnishings. He justified his position by going to the FAM-Foreign Affairs Manual, a collection of our regulations-where there's a section that says, "Furnished quarters will be provided the following:" If you go down that list you'll find everything from refrigerators to sofas to chairs, and you'll find the word "bed." The admin officer in Beirut said, "See? There's no mention of cribs there."

I was ticked off by that, and I wrote a letter to AFSA (the American Foreign Service Association). I was always a member and a strong believer in AFSA.

Q. That's a union....

CECIL: ...a professional association and union representative.

I said, "There's a discrepancy here between embassy practices, clearly. One bureau, at least, thinks it's okay, and the other bureau doesn't seem to." I got a nice letter back from Herman Cohen who at the time was chairman of the AFSA Members' Interests Committee. He was assigned to Kampala, where I think he was Admin Officer at the time, though it could be that he had been Admin Officer in an earlier assignment.

Q: It could be Hank Cohen.

CECIL: Yes, Hank Cohen. He later went on to be Assistant Secretary for African affairs. He said clearly he had used embassy funds to purchase baby cribs for other families, and he had never been called to account. He undertook to write the Admin Officer in Beirut about that. We wound up buying a second crib in Beirut, but hopefully those who came after us were able to benefit from a more liberal interpretation, probably after the arrival of a new Admin Officer.

Another Admin Officer that I later met said, "Well, if you use a little common sense, a bed for a baby is a crib, and that's all the justification you need." For the rest of my career, I'm afraid I was guilty of separating admin officers into two categories. There are those who say, "Let me see what the FAM says. If it says I can do it, I'll do it." There are others who say, "Let me see what the FAM says, and as long as it doesn't say I can't do it, I'll do it." As I went through future assignments I often applied the baby crib test to categorize Admin Officers because they do sometimes fall into those two different categories. Officers who are unsure of themselves will opt for the literal, by-the-book interpretation. More confident officers will apply common sense.

Q.You said you had another child on the way?

CECIL: Yes, a daughter born in Beirut in May of '72 at AUB Hospital.

Q: American University Beirut.

CECIL: Right. Perfectly modern, competent. Lebanese doctors. My wife was very happy with her pediatrician. We had no problems there as far as medical care was concerned.

Q. Let's talk about the language program. How did you find the training there?

CECIL: That's a good question. It planted a seed of interest in language teaching methodology. I had been quite fascinated by FSI's methods when I studied Swahili in Washington under Dr. Earl Stevick. Dr. Stevick was a leader in the field of language teaching methodology. Perhaps I was spoiled by his Swahili course because when I got to Beirut I found that the methods were rather old-fashioned and certainly not very innovative. The program as you probably know was 30 hours a week in class; in other words, six hours a day in class, five days a week and at least two hours homework every evening. It was very much a full-time program.

But when I arrived I found that FSI Beirut was still using FSI textbooks that relied on transliteration of the Arabic script into the Roman alphabet. I thought that there was no place for transliteration in our study program. In my view it was a crutch that simply slowed down and hampered our gaining the ability to read Arabic script. Also, the course was heavily into Palestinian Arabic and Lebanese Arabic, lots of dialect. The school had a lot of materials dealing with Lebanese colloquial Arabic. Our teachers, after all, were all either Lebanese or Palestinian, every one of them, so it's maybe natural that that's what we would be learning in Beirut. But I thought the emphasis on local dialect was misguided.

Q: What type of Arabic were you...

CECIL: FSI has always claimed to teach what they called "Modern Standard Arabic." It's the language of the radio news broadcasts. It's not classical Arabic and not literary Arabic, but it's the Arabic that if you turn on the BBC and listen to the news being broadcast in Arabic or if you turn on Beirut radio and listen to the news or watch television, it's the Arabic of the news broadcasts. It's a formalized Arabic which is standard throughout the Arab world. There's a difference between the spoken language and the written language and the language used in formal presentations like at a university lecture or a political speech or a news broadcast. That's a more formal kind of Arabic.

At the end of the 15 months, I came out with an S3 Plus, R3 Plus. The FSI director noted on my final report I almost made four in both cases but didn't quite do it. My experience at FSI Beirut planted the seeds of interest in language teaching methodology that led me to seek the assignment, thirteen years later, as director of the FSI Arabic school, which by then had been moved to Tunis because of the Lebanese civil war. We'll talk about that assignment later.

Q: What was your motivation, and that of your fellow students?-and your attitude toward Israel?

CECIL: I don't think anyone asks for Arabic language training because they're anti-Israeli. It could be that if you study the issues at stake in that part of the world, you eventually come to the conclusion that we're paying a high cost for the policy that has been the policy of our administrations since the time of Harry Truman. One might reach that conclusion eventually.

I don't know why Foreign Service Officers want to study Arabic except that it's a fascinating part of the world. It certainly can cause you difficulties in your career, a lot of criticism, criticism by journalists. Joseph Kraft was one prominent journalist in my younger years who used to criticize State Department Arabists. I think we were all-almost all-very serious and all looking forward to many assignments in the Arab world.

Q. Were you picking up through your course some anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian moods, attitudes? Was that infecting you or your... This has been one of the charges that has been leveled at Arabists, particularly in the earlier days.

CECIL: I don't think there was anything in the course of instruction that contributed to that. I had studied two years at SAIS before joining the Foreign Service, a program that straddled African and Middle Eastern studies, actually looking at Islam in Black Africa, but I had taken pretty standard background courses on the Middle East.

I had written an article which I published under a pseudonym before entering the Foreign Service about our national interests in the Middle East. I was already of the persuasion that our policies were not serving our national interests in the area. I thought we were unduly deferential to Israeli objectives and were not genuinely pursuing our own interests. I didn't need any guidance. I had already inclined in that direction. I will say, though, when we talk about the trip to Israeli that I made while in Beirut, that I came back from Israel greatly impressed by what the Israelis had achieved. I thought the Arabs came off clearly as somewhat inept and certainly inefficient in trying to manage their own affairs.

Q. Tell me about that trip.

CECIL: The Beirut school at that time had travel funds to promote regional orientation and familiarity. And it was a policy that every student should make an orientation visit to Israel. It wasn't an absolute requirement, but it was strongly encouraged. That was very useful. Not only did we go to Israel, but from time to time in the course we were given travel money and were told, basically, "Get out now in the real world and try out what you've been learning in the classroom. Go take a trip somewhere and survive on this Arabic." In addition to my trip to Israel I spent four weeks in the Arabian Gulf area, almost two weeks in Sudan, and three days in Syria. My trip to Israel was in November and December 1971-about ten days in all. After a week of official orientation my wife joined me for another three or four days.

Q: This would have been about four years after the '67 war. The Israelis were ranking pretty high at this time. I want to get your impressions.

CECIL: It was the 26th of November 1971 that I arrived in Israel. I went with one friend, a fellow named Ed Kelly, from school and another one joined us slightly later. We had to, of course, fly first to Cyprus from Beirut and from Cyprus to Tel Aviv. We arranged to arrive just before a weekend. We checked into a hotel around six or seven in the evening and immediately looked for the little booklet that you find in most hotels about this week in Tel Aviv. We found an evening cultural program at the ZOA-Zionist Organization of America-which was not far away. We immediately went there and saw a very nice evening of Israeli folk music and dancing all of which was performed by soldiers who were on weekend leave from the front in Sinai. It was a very effective propaganda message. The audience was full of American visitors, and I was very impressed at the way the Israelis conveyed their political message under a cultural umbrella there.

The DCM whose name slips my mind at the moment was very supportive of our trip; Embassy Tel Aviv always supported FSI students' visits. The DCM let us hire his driver for the weekend, a Yemeni Jew named Yehuda. I'll have to think of this last name. We hired Yehuda who was fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, Yiddish, English, and some German. For $50 plus food and lodging, Yehuda was our driver for the two-day weekend using the embassy car which the embassy provided. He was a wonderful driver and a great source of knowledge. With Yehuda's help, we went up the Golan Heights, and he talked us past the checkpoint, and we were allowed to actually go into the formerly Syrian city of Quneitra which was totally uninhabited, but we were able to drive around it and see the devastation. The Israelis had absolutely literally destroyed it.

I came away from that visit thinking that the Israelis would never relinquish the Golan Heights. I could see the strategic importance. You could look down into the valley over the Sea of Galilee and understand why it was so important that they maintain control of that. I'm not surprised that here we are today in 2007 and the Golan Heights are still very much under Israeli control.

Ed and I had arranged to spend out first night at a kibbutz in the north called Kfar Blum, a kibbutz I had read about in an article in The Middle East Journal that had to do with Israeli agriculture, I think it was-a kibbutz settled primarily by American Jews. They took in travelers for a modest fee, and we had a very fine evening there and breakfast talking with a couple of American members of the kibbutz. We learned a lot about their point of view, and I was impressed by what they had done.

We went to the little town of Metula which is the northernmost Israeli settlement on the border with Lebanon, and then we were able to follow the border fence on an adjacent road all the way to the sea just south of the border cross point with Lebanon.

We spent our second night in another kibbutz, but that was more like a motel, more oriented to tourists, and we didn't have the opportunity for conversation there as we had at Kfar Blum. Throughout our travel, which also included the Negev, we were able to get as far as Beersheba for the Bedouin market early in the morning. I forget which day that was, Friday or Saturday. We covered a lot of territory and in our talks with Israelis I found no willingness to compromise on any issues at that time. At one point we gave a ride to a Tunisian whom we found walking along the road. In his Tunisian Arabic he was absolutely condemnatory or all the surrounding Arab neighbors. He was 100% a Jew and certainly though he looked and sounded like an Arab, he had no Arab feelings I would say.

I had arrived in Israel after having read a very interesting book by a writer named Amos Elon. His book was titled The Israelis: Founders and Sons. It was a rather optimistic book that argued that Israel was on the verge of a shift in generations and that the older generation that had founded the state and had been born mostly in Europe were going to be replaced by the Sabras, the Israeli-born younger generation, and that this generation was going to be more inclined toward finding an accommodation with the Arabs and putting war and hostility behind them. It was a very well written book, and it convinced me that there were grounds to hope. But I didn't find any of that in the course of our visit, and I guess the subsequent years have shown that that was unfulfilled optimism.

We drove to the south to Beersheba and went to the Arab bedouin market in Beersheba. We had excellent meetings during our week. We met with members of the Knesset, and with Foreign Ministry officials. I was impressed at how much they knew about the Arab World. We met with their office controlling Israeli water resources which was interesting to hear how water influenced their policy. I came back to Beirut impressed with Israeli efficiency, especially compared to Arab efficiency, so-called, that I had seen in Kuwait and even in Lebanon. The Israelis were head and shoulders above the Arabs in their ability to organize and manage things. I do recall that the DAO-defense attachï¿½-in our embassy in Tel Aviv told us how difficult the Israeli military was to work with, that they were extremely demanding and sometimes rather rigid. He found them in general difficult to work with.

Q: While you were there, did the question of settlements in the East Bank come up at all?

CECIL: At this point I don't remember discussing it. I do remember one strong impression, a surprise to me, that I got during that trip. I had been able to visit Jerusalem in December of '66 when I was in Kuwait. I went to Jerusalem for Thanksgiving, for the holidays. The part I went to was under Jordanian control, so the temple mount, that area, was all under Jordanian control. I remember walking in the very narrow streets, almost like alleys, adjacent to the Wailing Wall. That was a lower class housing area, residential, but certainly lower class people and not very well off economically. When I returned in 1971 that area had been entirely razed of all housing, and it was a vast, open plaza. I was startled and surprised at what the Israelis had done. Perfectly understandable what they did but nevertheless I wasn't prepared for the impression. I wondered where had all those Arabs gone? Where were they living now? Beyond that, I actually don't remember talking about the new settlements.

Q: This is more of a bigger question, but while we're talking about Israel, were you picking up from your travels in the other embassies the feeling that our embassy in Tel Aviv was almost the enemy, or was it out of sync with American policy, or was it just another embassy?

CECIL: I don't have any firm memories of that now. I do believe if I think back hard that our ambassador-I think it was Ambassador Barber-and the DCM who lent us his driver, I think they were strong advocates of providing more military equipment and assistance to Israel. I hope I'm not misstating their position, but that's my recollection.

I don't find that surprising that they were looking for ways to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Israel. That's part of their job as well as trying to find the proper balance for our own interests. I don't think I would have regarded them as the enemy in any sense. They were extremely helpful to us.

Q: Not just you, but I was wondering if there was an atmosphere among the people who were studying Arabic about Tel Aviv, our embassy and all.

CECIL: I don't have any recollection of ever having had that feeling. The embassy in Tel Aviv always went out of its way to help FSI students learn about the country.

Another thing that impressed me during my visit was the visit to the memorial of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. It's a very impressive testimony to the horrors of the holocaust. Certainly I came back with very favorable impressions about what the Israelis had achieved. I still didn't think we were taking into account all of our own interests, particularly economic ones-political ones as well, I guess I would say, in the Arab world.

I remember writing to a friend after the trip saying this visit sure makes the Arabs look like a bunch of incompetents when you compare conditions in Kuwait where I had served and Lebanon or the countries I had visited like Egypt, which just made the Arabs look like they were nowhere in the same league as the Israelis in being able to achieve things and run a modern country.

Q. What about your other trips?

CECIL: In February of '72 I started out on my four-week Gulf trip. I had arranged by letter to stay with a Kuwaiti friend that I had gotten very close to during my tour in Kuwait. He offered me a room in his very small and modest house for two weeks. I spent all of my days moving around town, calling on old friends from my tour which had been 1966 to '68 so, in other words, four years earlier I had left. I genuinely tried to speak Arabic as much as I could. I'd say I did fairly well with that. There were certainly times when I lapsed into English, but it was a very good opportunity there to try out what I had learned. Then I moved down the Gulf.

Q; In Kuwait in the fours years intervening, had you seen any change in Kuwait, or was it pretty much the same?

CECIL: It wasn't the dramatic change that more time would have produced. Certainly Kuwait was developing and expanding outside the city in all directions, but I don't recall shocking changes. I could still find my way around; I knew where I was. It was continuing to build and expand but nothing really dramatic, I would say.When I headed down the Gulf at that time the only embassy we had in the Gulf was in Bahrain, and that was just in the early stage. John Gatch was our chargï¿½ in Manama, Bahrain. He had been my DCM in Kuwait, so he welcomed me and helped orient me for whatever time I spent in Bahrain. It probably was two days or so. He had set up operations out of temporary facilities, had proposed to Washington that we rent a facility call Al-Bustan-The Garden-which was a small palatial building surrounded with a very nice garden. He thought it was a perfect embassy, but I guess Washington thought it too expensive or excessive to our needs. In the end he had to settle on something else.

After Bahrain I went on to Doha. My main conversations there were with a representative of Citibank which had opened an office. Doha was a very modest little town. I had one or two other conversations. I think I called on a British representative, but I cut my time there short and left about a half a day earlier than originally planned because I felt like I had exhausted any doors I could open, so I moved on to Abu Dhabi.

In Abu Dhabi I was welcomed by their office of public information or whatever they called it, and I was treated as a guest of the government. They gave me a car and a driver, and that allowed me to go inland to El Ain, the oasis adjacent to the Omani oasis of Buraimi, so I was able to see Oman from that side and go over into Oman because there was no effective border control at that point.

Q: [Inaudible]

CECIL: The border was probably not officially determined at that point. I know the Saudi border wasn't determined even when I served in Oman in the '80s. The Saudis had sent troops into Buraimi at one point, decided to seize it and control it. I think through British support, they were forced to withdraw.

I had a nice visit in Abu Dhabi. The government arranged two or three calls for me to talk to people, and I got impressions there of a country just beginning to wake up.

Q: Had it turned into the United Arab Emirates at that point, or was it still the Trucial States?

CECIL: It wasn't the Trucial States. I think it was called the UAE at that point. As far as I can recall it was. Abu Dhabi was recognized as the capital. It was the early stages. I don't recall exactly what year the UAE was officially formed, but I'm pretty sure it had already happened. I went on to Dubai and spent a couple of days there in a modest motel near the Creek, as they called it. I was impressed with the very active commerce there, lots of dhows and modest, more modern vessels coming over from Iran carrying all kinds of things back and forth, carrying refrigerators from Dubai over to Iran and bringing I don't know what from Iran into Dubai. It was a vibrant economy.

CECIL: Then I flew on to Muscat. I was very fortunate in that a British friend of mine who had been working in Zanzibar managing the Port of Zanzibar for the British company called Smith-MacKenzie in East Africa, had been transferred from Zanzibar to Muscat, where the company was called Gray-MacKenzie. I knew this in advance, so he welcomed me and put me up for five days in his apartment and helped me see Muscat, the capital area part of Oman which was emerging from the Middle Ages. Sultan Qaboos had come into power in summer 1970, and here I was in March of '72. There were virtually no paved roads. There were some in the city, but they stopped outside the walls.

Q: Did they still lock the gate at night?

CECIL: They didn't do that, but everyone told me they had done that, and certainly beyond the gate there were no paved roads, only an unpaved track. I was very happy to have that opportunity because since I served in Muscat in the mid-'80s it gave me some historical reference point to gauge my impressions.

Q: Had they stopped the war in the south? At one time there was a subliminal little war going on.

CECIL: The Dhofar War. In March of '72 I don't think it was over yet; I'd have to review my history. That was one of the main reasons why the British acquiesced, if that's the word, or even connived with Sultan Qaboos to replace his father. The British were very concerned about the lack of progress in Dhofar in fighting that communist- supported rebellion, so I don't think it was totally over but with the new ruler light was at the end of the tunnel.

Q: Did you get any feel in the Gulf about the attitude towards particularly Iran at that time?

CECIL: It's hard for me to separate what I know now from when did I learn it. When I served in Oman in the mid-'80s the Omani concern for maintaining a proper relationship with Iran was very, very strong. I think all of the Arab Emirates constantly had that in mind. Iran was considered a potential threat. Bahrain was extremely concerned about the Iranian support for the Shia of Bahrain. When did the Iranian seizure of Aba Musa and The Tunbs take place? I don't remember the year. I think it had happened, so it was fresh in people's memory.

Q: These were two little islands.

CECIL: Yes, which had previously been regarded as, I believe, belonging to Abu Dhabi, if I'm correct, at least one of the UAE Emirates. There was a lot of concern, but I don't know when I became so aware of it.

Q: What other trip did you have?

CECIL: There was a three-day trip to Palmyra, in Syria, which was interesting but mostly touristically oriented, with no real political or economic discussions. The really significant trip was the trip to Sudan. That was August of 1972. I arranged it and was accompanied by two other colleagues from FSI: John Brady and Whitley Bruner. The three of us flew briefly to Jeddah where we got the plane into Khartoum. We then had a meeting in the embassy with Curt Moore, the DCM, who a few months later was assassinated along with Cleo Noel, our ambassador. I had met Curt when he was desk officer for Saudi Arabia during my A100 course. I spent a day with him when we went over to the Department to learn what the work of a desk officer was. He welcomed us warmly in Khartoum and gave us good briefings.

Then we flew on down to Juba where we had timed our trip so we could get on a boat that periodically went up and down the Nile. We spent most of a day in Juba. We talked to a British fellow in charge of UN... I'm not sure what kind of operations they were. I don't think they were a refuge relief operation but some kind of UN program. We met a couple of Sudanese officials and had the cursory superficial talks with them. In mid to late afternoon we were able to board our boat. This boat took six days to go north on the river. Almost three full days were in what's called the Sudd. That's the papyrus marsh where there are virtually no settlements. It's just a huge marsh that the river manages to make its way through. On the sixth day the boat reaches the town of Kosti, and at Kosti you can get the train which in just under 24 hours will get you back to Khartoum.

The objective of all these trips was to go speak Arabic, so we were a little surprised that there weren't that many Arabic speakers in southern Sudan. In Juba itself we found that the officials-most of whom were African rather than Arab-spoke English. Many of them weren't Muslim. This was true along the river where during the first day or two, there were small villages that we would stop at. These villages were totally African villages. The inhabitants didn't speak Arabic. They were either Animists or Christian. Christian missionaries had been in the area proselytizing, so they were not in any way Islamic, Muslim, or Arab. They had learned English from missionaries if they spoke any foreign language at all other than their local language. The only opportunity we had to speak Arabic was with the boat crew-they were all northerners-and the fact that the central government in Khartoum was withdrawing their soldiers from the south because there had been a peace accord signed a few months earlier ending the southern rebellion at that time. Officers of the Sudanese army were being brought home on the boat. Not all of them, but at least there was a good half dozen on our boat, so we were able to speak Arabic with them.

I came out of that trip with several impressions about Sudan. First, I thought that the cultural and linguistic gap between north and south, and the sheer size of the country, made it highly unlikely that the country could remain united. Second, I was happy that the southern Sudanese rebellion had not succeeded because if it had, Juba would have been the capital and we would all have been subject to being assigned to Juba. There was not a single paved street in Juba in 1972. It was the end of the world, I thought. I came away impressed with the tremendous challenge of communication that faced Sudan, the tremendous need for infrastructure, the great distances involved.

I also had impressions at the time of a certain lack of initiative that struck me along the way. For instance, in Juba there were no mangos to be bought. The UN fellow told us that there were many, many villages within a 50 mile radius that had many, many mangos, while the villagers needed salt and cooking oil. Virtually no one was able to bring mangos into Juba to sell them and to exchange them for salt or cooking oil. There seemed to be a total absence of commerce even at that level. On the boat itself there were no soft drinks, no beer available although both beer and soft drinks are made in Sudan. No one seemed to think that the passengers might want them, so we drank tea and water for six days. We would have been happy to buy soft drinks and give somebody a little profit. The same was true up the river at the village stops. It didn't seem that any commerce was facilitated by the boat.

The boat was loaded with local people making a trip north. There were several barges lashed to the boat: three on the left side and three on the right side, and they were teeming with local people traveling for one reason or another. Few people seemed to take this as an opportunity for commerce. We were fortunate in that the boat had three decks. We were on the topmost deck since we were traveling in what they called "first class" cabins which were modest. On the third deck you could see over the papyrus, those two or three days when we were in the Sudd. If we had been on the second deck or first deck, we would have been in a green tunnel for three days because you just see the papyrus going by you at eye level on those lower decks. It was a very impressive trip.

The train from Kosti to Khartoum I wrote to a friend at the time was the filthiest train I had ever been on in my life, and we were riding first class. We survived, and that added to my impressions about Sudan's terrible state as far as infrastructure was concerned.

In Khartoum we had a couple of calls on Sudanese officials. I don't remember anything of importance there. We went over to Omdurman to visit the tomb of the Mahdi, which we were able to do with no trouble. I had read a fascinating chapter about General Gordon in Lytton Strachey's book Imminent Victorians which is a superb character profile of General Gordon and what he was like as a person, something that anyone who goes to Sudan should read.

Q: During the time you were taking the language, what was the situation in Lebanon? I realize you were concentrating on language, but was it a quiet period in Lebanon?

CECIL: It was. You could see the seeds of what was about to happen. As an example, the eight-story apartment building we lived in looked down on a Palestinian refugee camp. Right below us. Right just on the other side of a wall.

Q: Sabra and Shatila, or one of those?

CECIL: Not far away. This was not Sabra and Shatila that we looked down on, but that was on the way out toward the airport. People were living in this camp, almost primitive conditions, coming and going, living in tents, living in little houses made out of sheet metal and corrugated metal and packing crates and things like that. You could easily see that they couldn't be very happy and that clearly they didn't regard themselves as very settled. They all always, of course, talked about going home to Palestine.

Q: As you were doing this, did you have any look at the Palestinian people? Did you get any feel for the Palestinian refugees, why Lebanon has turned out to be a major problem?

CECIL: I guess I would have to say that I didn't cultivate Palestinians, certainly not those in the camp next to my apartment building. A couple of our language teachers were Palestinian. We had some association with professional Palestinians: doctors, teachers. But the kind of Palestinian living in refugee camps I don't think I ever met except occasionally one or two walking past the door of the apartment building. We would have very brief conversations.

Q: But it was an issue you were looking at?

CECIL: I would be surprised if the embassy wasn't looking at it, but I was not there as a reporting officer. I spent all my time in language studies or on regional orientation trips. I have to beg off and say it's not something I focused on, but I would be surprised if the embassy wasn't following it very closely.

Q: Did you pick up any feel for Arab political foes?

CECIL: I'm not sure what you mean.

Q: I think that Nasser was dead by this time, ___ .

CECIL: Yes, he died in September 1970. Certainly in the 70s the Arab world had not yet accepted the existence of Israel and was still talking a very brave, aggressive line. It was before the '73 war that we're talking about. They talk a very aggressive line and Nasser had based a lot of his appeal on combat and on the defeat of the Egyptian army in the 1948 war. That's part of what led to Nasser coming to power. It's only in more recent decades that the Arabs have become more realistic about the possibilities open to them and a number of the governments, Egypt and Jordan and even Saudi Arabia now, have stated their willingness to accept Israel. Jordan was one of the first to negotiate peace agreements. That's gradually evolved. Back in the '60s and early '70s no, I don't think that was acceptable in Arab political discourse. They didn't even use the word "Israel."

Q: So what did you do after Arabic studies?

CECIL: In January of '73 we went to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia where I was Pol/Mil (Political/Military) Officer, so that would be a good place to pick up next time. Before doing that though, I might mention two other points briefly.

One was that my time in Beirut convinced me that I wanted to avoid serving in large embassies. Probably compared to many of our western European embassies, Beirut wasn't all that large, but still it was a multiple of the size of Kuwait or Dar-es-Salaam. I felt that I wanted to serve in small embassies so I could be really involved in things and have a broad area of responsibility. I felt that in the large embassy in Beirut it must be difficult to know everything that was going on and to coordinate with colleagues. Through the rest of my career had a preference for small or, maybe later, medium size embassies, but I always wanted to avoid the large ones.

As I neared the end of my course I was supposed to be assigned to Muscat. We were going to open an embassy there in the summer of '72, a few months after my visit. Our ambassador was in Kuwait in those days, accredited down the Gulf. We were sending a chargï¿½ to open up in Muscat, a fellow named Pat Quinlan. He and his wife passed through Beirut and met me and my wife. We probably were going to Muscat. He offered me the job as his Number Two. It was probably going to be a three-man post. I was going to be called Economic Commercial Officer but would have ample opportunity to do political reporting. I am a political officer, so that was important to me. I was absolutely fascinated by the country and the idea of going.

In the end the assignment didn't happen. After the chargï¿½ had been there a short time, he sent me a message through his admin officer who was on his way back to the States, asking for my comments on the proposed apartment that they planned to rent for us. It was extremely modest. It had no bathtub, for instance. It had only a shower. It had no storage space, no closets, and the building itself had no storage space. A washing machine they would provide would have to be out on the balcony of the apartment. Since he asked for my comments, I sent back a series of comments basically saying, "If this choice has been mandated by the department's failing to give you enough money to rent something better, then I think you should go back and ask for more money." Certainly with two small children under the age of three, having a bathtub is a fairly important thing at that point. In general it seemed like an extremely small apartment they were going to put us in.

I got an answer back which I found very curt and abrupt. Basically he said, "I think you need to decide if you really want this assignment or not." I didn't like that. I thought this is not the basis for a mutually supportive relationship that I want to go into in such a small post. I replied to him by saying "I don't think I can go under these circumstances. Please consider my assignment broken." I sent a copy of my message to the Department. I was out of line doing that, and the Department later told me so in a very strong letter I got from a man named Hunter Estep who told me it was the Department that makes or breaks assignments, not the officers concerned.

In any case, they accepted that I wouldn't be going. There was a period of a few weeks or maybe a couple of months that I didn't know where I was going. In the end, suddenly I found myself assigned in Jeddah as Pol-Mil officer: political military officer. We went there in January of '73 right after Christmas.

Looking back I would say certainly on the one hand I regret not going to Muscat in 1972 or early '73. It would have been a fascinating opportunity to see the country in the very beginning stages of opening up to the West. I presume in a post that small I might have gotten to know Sultan Qaboos who was almost exactly my age. That might have laid the foundation for a later assignment farther on in my career.

On the other hand it would have been a lot like Zanzibar in that it was a three or four man post, and I had just done that in Zanzibar, a little bit of everything, jack of all trades, but master of none. Going to Jeddah gave me the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of a particular specialty, political-military affairs. It gave my expertise more depth than I probably would have acquired in Muscat. As we'll see when to talk about Jeddah I think on the whole it was the best thing for me. The ambassador and the DCM were two of the best Arabists in the Service and I learned a tremendous amount from them, in addition to acquiring experience in the most important country on the peninsula.

Q: Looking at, here you are an Arabist, you've gotten a pretty good background in Arabic. You're 3+, so this is impressive. But you had this trip around their world and saw that it really wasn't very effective in running itself. Unfortunately, it probably continues to work that way. Did you have any second thoughts as a Foreign Service officer, as an American go-getter, about being in a second rate area?

CECIL: You mean working in the Arab world?

Q: Yes.

CECIL: Oh, never.

Q; What was it that grabbed you about the Arab world?

CECIL: A couple of things. First, the importance of our national interests. There was never any doubt in my mind that we had vital international, economic, and political interests in the Arab world that deserved to be pursued with all of our ability. That was, perhaps, the fundamental basis for my interest, but supporting that was my genuine interest in the Arabic language and Arab-Muslim culture. I was always interested in languages in general, but I was especially interested in Arabic and in Arab history. I simply wanted to get to know that part of the world better, and I thought I could play a role as a spokesperson for my own country and an interpreter back to my own country and my own government of Arab points of view. I thought the Arab world was probably inadequately known in the United States and that I could probably do something to help remedy that. I never had any doubts about the importance of working in the Arab world.

Q: You were in Jeddah from when to when?

CECIL: I arrived in mid-January of '73, and I left in late May of '75, so just a little bit under two and a half years.

Q: Jeddah at that time was where our embassy was located.

CECIL: Right. The Saudis did not want any embassies in Riyadh, so all of the embassies were in Jeddah. Jeddah, of course, was the traditional entry point into Saudi Arabia for foreigners. It was the pilgrimage entry point. Mecca is about an hour's drive away by car. Jeddah was also the commercial center of the country. It was the place that foreigners were allowed to reside in the old days, and we were still in the latter part of that period. Over in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia, Al-Hasa province, Aramco was very much in existence by then. They first found oil in 1938 and had begun to develop it after the world war was over.

There were Americans living in the eastern province where we had opened our consulate. There were no diplomatic or consular facilities in Riyadh. Our practice was to live and work in Jeddah where the foreign ministry was. That was the only ministerial headquarters located in Jeddah. All the other ministries were in Riyadh. My job required me to go to Riyadh about every third week. I would go usually for two nights-three working days and two nights-and do my work in Riyadh. We had very nice housing in Jeddah not too far from the embassy compound but outside the compound. We were one of three houses in a row that were rented by the embassy.

The nature of the post and of the country and of our bilateral relationship, I would say, changed totally during my time. When I arrived in January of '73, Saudi Arabia was a foreign aid recipient. We provided funds for military training, the IMET program in the States. We had a public safety mission there from AID. We were giving various kinds of modest but important assistance to the Saudi government. This, of course, changed totally after the quadrupling of oil prices in November of '73, and we'll get to that point after we talk about the October war of '73.

The embassy itself changed... I'm not sure of the best word-radically? Significantly?-in character and operations when we had a change of ambassadors.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you arrived?

CECIL: When I arrived the ambassador was Nicholas Thatcher. Nick Thatcher was... I suppose people might use terms like "old school." He was a career officer. We had only had career officers up to that point. He very much played his cards close to his chest. He did not share all of his information with his staff, and that was also true of the military relationship. An American general headed what we called the U.S. Military Training Mission: the USMTM or [phonetically] use-mittem as we called it.

The general lived in Dhahran where we had something over a hundred U.S. military advisors and a smaller number in Riyadh, a USMTM office facility in Riyadh where many of them were assigned to the Saudi ministry of defense or to other military organizations. The general would come over to Jeddah periodically and meet with the ambassador. I would always be there as a note taker. I would prepare notes for the ambassador beforehand about issues that I thought were important. After we would cover the points on my memo, then usually the ambassador would ask me to leave, and he would have his own session with the general which would be another 20 or 30 minutes. I never knew what went on in those sessions. This was typical of the way he managed the affairs of the embassy. It was difficult for other staff members to know sometimes just what our policy was because we didn't know what the ambassador thought about an issue.

I was political-military officer reporting to a combined chief of the whole econ section and above him the DCM and then the ambassador. Sometimes the DCM would task me directly with work. There was one other political officer in the section. He was more or less my equal. I guess you might say he was the political officer and I was the pol-mil officer. It was at that point a fairly small operation.

I was interested in broadening my contacts. I looked for opportunities to use my Arabic. One example of an early encounter with the ambassador's philosophy of the role of his staff was I discovered that the mayor of Jeddah was also chairman of a city planning commission which had its own offices in town. For whatever reason I thought of, I thought this was an opportunity to learn more about Jeddah and the plans for the future. Because I was at least in a pol-econ section, I said, "I want to talk to the mayor in his role as chairman of the planning commission." I made an appointment, and I went to the office. When I came back a day or so later, the ambassador called me and said, "Chuck, I understand you've been to see the major." I said, "Yes, but I called on him in his capacity as chairman of the planning commission, and I went to the planning commission office, not to the mayor's office." The ambassador didn't see much value in that distinction, and he asked me in the future to please check with him before requesting such high level appointments. I was put in my place! I learned a lesson from that.

Because we had come on a direct transfer from Beirut, we had deferred home leave. We went back to the States in September on home leave of around five or six weeks. Shortly before I left Jeddah, it turned out there was an article in a Lebanese Arabic newspaper which said that Nicholas Thatcher was going to be replaced as ambassador to Saudi Arabia and would be leaving soon. None of us had heard anything about this.

The DCM called the whole staff into his office. The DCM was Hume Horan. Hume spent five years as DCM in Jeddah under four different ambassadors when he finally left. Hume called us all in, told us to deny the story if we were asked by anyone; there was absolutely no truth to the article. The article had been presented to the DCM by the Iranian DCM who had picked it up through his own sources. Okay, those were our orders, and that's what we said, but shortly after that I left for home leave.

It turned out that while we were on home leave indeed, Nick Thatcher was recalled. At the same time practically in October, the Arab-Israeli War of '73 broke out. A new ambassador, Jim Akins, was announced, quickly confirmed, and left for Jeddah while we were still on leave and arrived around the third week of October. He presented his credentials almost immediately to King Faisal, so had already been there for a week or two when we returned at the end of October.

I had a friend working in the White House at that time. After Jim Akins's appointment had been announced I visited my friend in his office one day while I was on home leave. My friend showed me an NSC memo a few months old reviewing our ambassadorial staffing at several Middle Eastern posts at that time. It mentioned Nick Thatcher and suggested that it was time he be moved on. That Lebanese newspaper sure seemed to have good sources!

Jim Akins's approach was totally different from Nick Thatcher's. It was like night and day. Jim was an Arabist, of course, a good Arabist, but a specialist in energy policy and petroleum affairs. He had been working at the White House on energy affairs and I think before that the director of the state department office that dealt with energy affairs.

Jim was a kind of person who was totally confident of himself and in a way that confidence transferred to his staff. He was tremendously supportive of everything we did. He gave us tremendous freedom. He put his own views out on the table very clearly in staff meetings. If the ambassador was gone to Riyadh or anywhere for that matter, even for a few days, the embassy just kept humming right along. There was never any doubt about what our policy was on an issue because Jim made it clear what our policy was. The staff could respond to inquiries and visitors. We moved along so efficiently. It was a very different atmosphere.

Q: As political-military officer, what was our policy at that particular time?

CECIL: We were in the early stages of tremendous buildup in our cooperative relationship with Saudi Arabia. It intensified after the war. The Arab response to the war included the embargo on oil exports to the U.S. The oil embargo I suppose was first announced before the end of that short war. In November of '73 oil prices were quadrupled, and the Saudis began to have so much money that they never had before, and we began to search for ways to recycle those "petro-dollars" as we called them. The U.S.-Saudi military relationship had several components. If I look at my very first Officer Efficiency Report where my job description was summarized, the programs that I was charged with overseeing were the following:

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was building several bases for the Saudis and also involved in a vehicle acquisition program. There was a new National Guard program that was developing. The National Guard in Saudi Arabia is a separate institution from the ministry of defense and was specially charged with ensuring the security of the House of Saud. (It was commanded by Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, who became king in 2005 following the death of Fahd, his half-brother.) There was a public safety program run by AID in connection with the ministry of interior, and I was also supposed to watch that. I was supposed to be the first point of contact for the U.S. military training mission with the embassy. We had what was called the Saudi Naval Expansion Program-SNEP-that was just beginning. We had a coast guard construction and training program, and the Saudis were also buying Hawk missiles from us as part of an air defense system managed by Raytheon. These are examples of the kinds of issues that I was supposed to be following. I was supposed to watch for issues that needed to be called to the ambassador's attention. I was the staff person who would do any follow-up required by the embassy as a result of discussions with the ambassador. My own conception of the job included the idea that I should get to know as many members of the Saudi military as I could, especially officers more-or-less my age, to try to assess their ideas on political and social issues. But of course in a larger sense I wanted to meet any Saudis I could, not just military Saudis, for the same reasons-to assess political and social trends.

Then there were things like the annual National War College trip that I and the defense attachï¿½ had worked on together, and I was supposed to be in touch with the various civilian contractors like Raytheon. We had many, many contractors in the country. Lockheed was another. Vinnell was one that got a contract for helping modernize the national guard. I don't think I remember all the companies now, but there were lots of them. The relationship was evidence of our concern for the security of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and for its ability to defend itself. It showed the importance of the oil reserves for our own national interests.

Q: Were there any particular areas of difficulty for you in these relationships that you were working on?

CECIL: What kind of relationships do you mean?

Q: I'm talking about the military contractors, of the Saudi ministries, particularly the ministry of defense. How did this all work out?

CECIL: I think on the one hand the general commending the U.S. military training mission probably by nature was inclined to look somewhat askance at the idea of a civilian State Department officer watching what he and his military training mission were doing. I think he also knew he had no choice but to accept the fact that the embassy had a legitimate interest in my being a point of contact and following their operations.

I had a lot to learn. I had served two years in the air force as an officer, and I grew up in an Air Force family, so I had a little bit of military culture behind me. Maybe that helped in my relations with the American members.

Q: It was an air force run command, wasn't it?

CECIL: No, not during my time but maybe later. These were generals. I forget their names now, but I know we had a change of command early on during my first year, I think. I don't remember if that was a one year or two year assignment. I only remember two generals at the moment, so perhaps the second one stayed on and was still there when I left. We may have been just about to get a third one who might possibly have been air force. Now that you say it, there probably was an Air Force general later because a lot of our programs were Air Force programs, so it made good sense.

My relationships were always very cooperative. The military helped me orient myself early on. For instance, I went down to southwestern Saudi Arabia to the town of Abha where the corps of engineers had helped to build a military base called Khamis Mushayt. I also was flown up to Tabouk in the northeast up near the Jordanian border to look at those military facilities. My U.S. military counterparts were quick to try to help me because they saw the value of having someone in the embassy well-informed about their activities and issues.

I tried to orient myself to the country as quickly as possible early in my tour. I knew how important that was to have the context of the country. I also went to Riyadh but to Dhahran early in my tour. I don't know of any particular tension other than the fact that the general probably would have preferred not to have anybody watching, but I didn't take it personally.

I used my trips to Riyadh to try to expand my Saudi contacts beyond strictly the military ones. It was hard to develop personal relationships with Saudis, especially Saudi military although I did become on good terms with-I think he was a colonel, maybe a major-Major Ahmed Malik, who was a real expert in economics and finance. Later after he left his military career he had a senior position in the Saudi SAME, the Saudi Arabia Monetary Authority, sort of like a central bank. People like him who were not strictly military in their focus but focusing in this case on economic issues. Those are the kinds of people that I sought out.

Nevertheless, I would say Saudis were not particularly open to social relationships. I think in the course of my two and a half years-I was thinking about this driving over here this morning-certainly I was invited to some large functions at Arab homes but probably under the umbrella of the DCM or the ambassador. I was included maybe because of some particular reason for the function. Maybe it was for a visiting business man or whoever might have been involved in military issues.

On my own as Chuck Cecil, I think I maybe had lunch in a Saudi home once or twice in two and a half years. It was different from Kuwait. Kuwaitis were much more open to social contact.

Q: This is pretty much the pattern I have talked about to other people who served in Saudi Arabia. Very difficult. For one thing, they are extremely family oriented, the Saudis are. They all eat at home at Mother's house or something like that.

CECIL: Right. I could say a few more words about our life in Jeddah in those days and then maybe we could talk more about the policy activities. I mentioned that we had a four bedroom one story house surrounded, of course, by a wall as all houses are. We had an Ethiopian live-in maid in a little house adjacent to the main house. We had a Saudi gardener, and we had a cook who came for dinner only. We had the two children by this time.

Certainly from my wife's point of view life in Jeddah for women lacked the spontaneity that American women like. The main reason for that was the prohibition against driving. The embassy provided transportation, but you had to fill out a written request a day in advance. There was nothing like, "Oh! I need a loaf of bread. I need to go to the store," or, "I need to go and buy eggs." If you didn't think of it the day before, you most likely were not going to be able to get the transportation. Women especially lose that spontaneity, but the embassy shuttle bus did try and fill in as best it could.

The neighborhood we lived in was infested with wild cats. With two little children playing out in the yard, we were a little concerned as were other families because these cats were filthy and they were aggressive. The embassy provided cat traps to every house in the neighborhood. There were cat traps that would hold two cats at a time. If you caught one you could maybe lure in another into the box and close the partition then catch your second cat. The embassy GSO would come and take the cat trap down to the fish market and let the cats loose in the fish market. That was one little aspect of life there.

One of the good points was that in Jeddah we had APO mail service, so we could get letters from the States in seven days. That was a far cry from Kuwait and Zanzibar where we relied on the old sea pouches that would arrive every two or three months with piles of magazines and newspapers. Air Mail was a little more frequent than every two or three months. That would be a couple of weeks to get a letter. But the APO was a great help by virtue of the military presence.

We had what were called welfare meetings for church services. There were no resident priests or ministers in our community in Jeddah at that time, but a priest or minister would come down from Beirut about once a month, is my recollection. There would be a meeting in the embassy auditorium. These were announced in the embassy bulletin as welfare meetings. So you had Welfare Meetings P and Welfare Meetings C depending on whether you were Protestant or Catholic. That's how we met our religious needs.

After five months-this just supports what I said earlier-I wrote a friend, and I said at that point I had not yet met any Saudi that I could have a real give-and-take of ideas the way I did in Kuwait. I found the Kuwaitis always open and talkative and eager to exchange views. The Saudis were not.

Another aspect of life in Saudi Arabia was the total security in the countryside which allowed us to go on camping trips even with our young children. The U.S. Geological Survey was a very important part of our presence in Saudi Arabia. They were exploring and mapping the mineral resources of the kingdom. That was a fine group of American geologists mostly who loved to be in the outdoors. We made friends there. We went on camping trips to places like Meda'in Salah, a Nabatean ruin north of Jeddah a few hours. We went to Taif more than once. We went on family camping out into the countryside to see both the scenery and certain historic ruins that we didn't always know what we were seeing. It was a good family life environment, none of the concerns we have today in Saudi Arabia.

Q: Did you get any feel for the pervasiveness of religion, Wahabyism and all of that?

CECIL: Absolutely. Certainly it was pervasive, and the Mutaween as they were called-the religious police-were very much a factor of life. Foreign women had to be very careful about how they dressed. There were many stories of Mutaween rapping foreign women's legs or ankles with their sticks if they thought their dresses were too short. My wife always wore what you could call a modified abaya. Abaya is the traditional women's dress in Saudi Arabia, the black robe. My wife had dresses made out of Western material, patterns, colors-not black-but otherwise an abaya. She did not wear a veil or a scarf. That wasn't required in those days. I understand that today in Saudi Arabia you almost always have to have a scarf if you're a woman, but it wasn't that strict then. It's certainly gotten more conservative since we were there. I think after what's called the siege of Mecca when the fundamentalists took over the mosque in 1979, the government and the royal family turned toward more conservative practices. Of course, the growth of terrorism has made it even more important to observe certain fundamentalist and conservative practices.

We need to talk a bit about the changes in our relationship with Saudi Arabia after the war. I learned a tremendous amount, another benefit of going to Jeddah instead of Muscat. Henry Kissinger started his shuttle diplomacy after the fighting had ended in October. He came during my remaining time in Saudi Arabia-that is, between late '73 and May of '75-he came 13 times to Saudi Arabia and after I left he came a couple of more times.

We were on the front burner as far as Washington's concerns were. I got tremendous experience as a control officer. That was extremely useful later in my career to be able to learn what's expected on these high level visits. Once we got into the attempts to recycle Saudi petro dollars and as the importance of Saudi Arabia became clear to everyone, we were inundated with high level visits from Washington. During my time we were visited by the president, who was Nixon, the vice-president who was Rockefeller when he came for the funeral of King Faisal, and by so many cabinet members I have forgotten. I was control officer for a visit by the secretary of the treasury, Simon, in Taif where he had to go to meet the Saudis at that time.

I know we had the deputy secretary of defense, a man named Clements. I'm not sure if we had the secretary of defense. We had so many congressmen and senators. At one point in Riyadh I was control officer for a visit by 19 members of the house armed services committee who came to learn more about our military relationship. It was tremendously educational; it was exhausting. We worked very long hours. We had few days to ourselves. Even on weekends there was always somebody coming from Washington. This was exacerbated by the fact that we worked the Muslim work-week, Saturday through Wednesday, so our Thursday-Friday weekend was regarded by people coming from Washington as just regular workdays.

I began to resent that, I must say, toward the end of my tour. I felt the Department was not providing us the staffing and the resources that we really required to carry out the load. I think I began to get a bit cynical about how the Department would treat its people overseas. Jim Akins was always asking Washington for more resources.

Another example of Jim's openness and collegiality was his use of representation funds. He said he didn't believe in fencing off a certain proportion of the representation funds for his own use or for the DCM's use. He said, "Here's the money. This is what we have. The DCM will approve your representation vouchers." I think he set a certain limit above which we needed prior okay. There were some monitoring controls in place, but he said, "We will use the money as we need it to do our job. When we get low, I'll ask Washington for more. If they can't find it, I'll tell them, 'All right, we have ceased representational activities. Until you can find more money, I'm not going to ask my officers to subsidize the activities of the U.S. government.'" And that's the way he worked. He almost always seemed to get what he needed, but sometimes it took more than one request.

Q: Did you get any feel for the relationship between Kissinger and Akins?

CECIL: Absolutely. There was tension between them from the very beginning. If I recall-I hope I'm not wrong on this-the timing of actions, I think Jim was actually nominated to become ambassador when William Rogers was still secretary of state and Kissinger was still NSC advisor. I'm not sure what Kissinger thought of the nomination originally, but in any case Jim often thought that instructions coming from Washington were not the best way to achieve our objectives, I guess I could say. Kissinger wanted to apply what I would call a get-tough policy on the Saudis. He didn't want to coddle them. Jim felt that there were other more effective ways to get what we needed.

The Saudis had a very welcoming and warm attitude toward Jim Akins. They trusted him, they confided in him. They told him things I'm sure they would not have told other ambassadors. He had an especially close relationship with Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the minister of petroleum. All the royal princes liked Jim Akins. They confided in him in ways that I thought were probably unprecedented. Jim felt that he knew the Saudis well, and he knew how to get what we needed. He often would question his instructions. This did not go over very well in Washington. If I recall correctly, Jim was fired by Kissinger in the fall of '75. We can talk about that when get to talking about my time as Saudi desk officer which is the assignment I came to after Jeddah.

After he was removed. Jim was called to testify before a congressional committee. I suppose it was the Senate Foreign Relations committee, though I forget which one. I guess the senators had been briefed and were probably told that he was fired because he questioned his instructions too often. One of the senators asked Jim, "Mr. Ambassador, is it true that you sometimes questioned or failed to carry out your instructions?" Jim said, "No. I never refused to carry out my instructions." There was a brief pause and he added, "Only if the instructions were stupid." I think you have there the essence of the relationship with Kissinger. They did not get along well.

The whole U.S.-Saudi relationship was transformed in the course of the year following the war. The whole American presence expanded tremendously, both the private sector relationship and military relationship. So many contractors came in and got large contracts from the Saudis to do various things.

I think the most important development during that time was the creation of what we called the Joint Economic Commission. This was an idea that sprang, if my memory is correct and I think it is, from talks between Jim Akins and Bill Simon, the secretary of the treasury. I remember Jim asking us-the staff of the embassy-to each officer he asked, no matter what your job was, he asked each officer to come up with two or three best ideas on how to recycle Saudi petro dollars. How could we gain the most of these dollars for American companies or for the American government? Each officer put his ideas down on paper. The ambassador asked Dennis Murphy, our econ officer at the time, to distill all of this into a cohesive series of ideas. This was submitted to Washington as Airgram A-11. We still sent airgrams in those days.

I believe it was June or July of '74 Prince Fahd was invited to Washington. Fahd was minister of interior, and he was invited to Washington. Jim Akins came back for that visit. When he returned from Washington, he said that he and Bill Simon in a late night session had developed a framework for this thing we were going to call the U.S.-Saudi Joint Economic Commission which would operate under the supervision of the Treasury Department. It would be in effect a kind of small USAID whose job it would be to contract for the Saudis to get them whatever they needed in the way of managerial or development services. This operation worked for 25 years until the year 2000. It was finally terminated more or less by mutual agreement.

That was a tremendous initiative and certainly we did contribute in many ways to strengthening and developing the government capability of Saudi Arabia and also strengthening the infrastructure. We did such things there as help them develop a consumer price index to gauge inflation. They had no such capability before that. We got all kinds of infrastructural support services for them. It was an extremely important aspect of our relationship.

Q: I've got two questions: One is, were we all concerned about the influxes of so many Americans coming into this society which is an exclusive one? Too many contractors and all this. Was this a problem during the time you were there?

CECIL: I don't think we tried to resist it. The idea of recycling Saudi petro dollars naturally led to a great influx of American personnel coming to Saudi Arabia, One indication of the difficulties was that Jim Akins... And here, I hate to speak for Jim; I hope maybe he's done these interviews, too. It was made very clear to us as so many of his views were. He strongly opposed establishing an American high school in Saudi Arabia throughout his time there. He said, "There will never be an American high school in Saudi Arabia during my tenure. This country is not ready for American teenagers. They will be a constant source of trouble. They'll get into trouble. They just don't fit into this conservative society." That was not well received by the business community. The business community wanted a high school, so Jim took a lot of heat over that. That's one sign.

Another was, for instance, the lady in charge of Arabic language instruction in Washington those years was a lady named Margaret Omar. She was American by birth, but she had an Egyptian husband and therefore the name Omar. She came out probably in early '74 to give a seminar that she called Arabic Language and Culture. It was a wonderful survey of the pitfalls of cultural misunderstanding between American society and Arab society. The ambassador was so impressed with her seminar that he said he needed her to go to Riyadh and to give this not only to the military training mission but also to the office managing the Saudi national guard expansion program and to open it up to any civilians who would attend as well from the defense related companies.

There were certainly many cultural pitfalls to be avoided. I won't try to repeat her seminar, but there were concerns. I don't know what else to say about them. I think some Americans came totally unprepared for the conservative, restrictive society. Others were well prepared. I think you had a whole gamut of reactions to this. Some people thrived and stayed a long time. Others couldn't take it and went home early.

Q: A further question, then I'm through. I'll leave it to you. Were you seeing with this development-all of a sudden you were there at the time when the Saudis moved from being a debtor nation to a creditor nation. Were you seeing a desirable influx of Saudi citizens, young people who had been trained in the United States or Britain or somewhere coming to the floor and able to take on technical jobs?

CECIL: Yes. I don't remember exactly when this happened, but after the war Saudis reorganized the cabinet. Saudis love to tell us that there were more holders of American PhD's in the Saudi Arabian cabinet than there were in the American cabinet.

Q: I'm sure there were!

CECIL: We had some very fine young Saudis. Ghazi al-Ghusaibi was one I recall. We had another who I believe was a SAIS graduate. We had a number of young Saudis in there, probably in their early 30's at that point who became ministers. Many of them held those positions for years. There's not a quick turnover. Saud al-Faisal was the foreign minister, the son of King Faisal. He was the foreign minister during Jim Akins's time, and he's still the foreign minister, more than 30 years later. They have tenure, you could say.

There were obviously other Saudis, U.S. educated, who filled positions at lower levels. They were not all ministers. I did not find them a force for political change. The general attitude that I found among the young Saudis that I could meet was they wanted to get rich. They were quite happy for the House of Saud to run the country, ensure stability. "I don't care about labor unions. I don't care about political parties. Just let me go into business and make my million." I found U.S.-educated Saudis focusing on their own personal interests and no way agitating for political reform back in that period.

Well, what else to say about the relationship? One or two examples of my work as apol-mil officer. This is related to your question about how did the cultures mix. I remember being impressed when I noted that lunch time for the U.S. military training mission in Riyadh was 12 noon. That's when the very small mess hall that they had there at their Riyadh offices served lunch. Of course, Saudi government working hours were theoretically eight to two I think it was. Might have been three, but I think more like two.

Not all Saudis showed up at 8:00 in the morning. It was closer to nine when they really got to working. Those military training officers who went to their minister of defense offices, they would be at work probably at 8:00, probably on time. About a quarter to twelve they would break away and go back to the compound for lunch. The Saudis, as I say, showed up and probably got into gear around nine or so. There was a period of slightly less than three hours a day when they might actually be in contact. By the time lunch was over it would be 1:00, and if the Americans went back to the ministry of defense, the Saudis were about ready to leave at that point. They didn't have many meetings after American lunch time. The Americans would stay on and do their paperwork but not much face-to-face contact with Saudis.

I mentioned this to Jim Akins. I said, "There's a disconnect here in cultures. For Saudis lunch is at 2:30 or 3:00, yet the Americans are leaving at a quarter to twelve to have lunch." I thought that he should suggest to the general that he push the lunch hour back to one or one-thirty at least to give a little more face time there with the Saudis. It was a case where Jim thought, "No, that's a military-culture issue, and I don't really want to tell the general how to run his mess hall or his lunch hour," so we didn't make an issue of it. That's an example.

One idea that I proposed to get more contact between our two military services was that our Mid-East Force invite Saudi naval officers to go on cruises with MIDEASTFOR up and down the Gulf. MIDEASTFOR was based in Bahrain, a very small fleet of three ships, there to demonstrate a U.S. presence in the Arabian Gulf area. I'm not sure if that ever happened. I remember discussing it with our military attachï¿½ at the time. He thought it was a good idea. He also was talking about some of the cultural pitfalls there. I guess I won't go into some of that, but he was talking about the preparations that would need to be made such has having little buckets of water in each of the toilet stalls for the Saudis who didn't use paper.

I talked earlier about some of my feelings of being over-worked and under-supported. I did begin to feel that the Department was taking advantage of us. I think later on, especially when I came back to Washington, I found the same thing on the Saudi desk. I think I began to adopt a little bit of a work-to-rules attitude sometimes. Nevertheless, on the whole I think it was an extremely educational assignment for me.

I had learned things about Saudi Arabia that I think are still valid. The question of succession. For instance, the royal succession up to now, more than thirty years later, is still following the same rules of succession. The sons of Abdul Aziz ibn Saud are the ones who are the kings, and they follow each other by strict order by age. Only one or two have stepped aside. They either didn't want to be king or were determined by the family maybe not to be qualified to be king. We're still going down that succession by age. After Abdullah dies, Prince Sultan will become king. There are a few more after him. It'll be really interesting. This is the question that has always fascinated me: How will the Saudis deal with the succession when there are no longer sons of Abdul Aziz ibn Saud capable of assuming the throne. That's a really fascinating question.

I wonder what I can say about some of the visits? Nixon did come in June of 1974. I remember that an advance party of 65 people arrived before the president. It was quite a tidal wave that came upon the embassy handling this. When the president himself came there were four airplane loads of people. One airplane was full of journalists, and the Saudis dedicated one entire hotel to housing the journalists.

The Saudis asked Jim Akins at one point, "What would be an appropriate gift for the president?" Jim was-is-a Quaker and against ostentation. He had some very strongly held views about gifts given to American officials. I can say a word about that later. He said to the Saudis, "It should be something symbolic of Saudi Arabia. What about frankincense and myrrh? If you put that all in a very nice engraved wooden box, that would be a very fine symbolic gift." The Saudi chief of protocol made notes. When the president came, the Saudis presented him the frankincense and myrrh, but it was in a solid gold box and rather large. There were some people who thought giving Nixon gold, frankincense, and myrrh was maybe not the appropriate thing. That was the gift given to the president.

Of course, he resigned six weeks later in August of '74. I recall that Hume Horan told us, the following year I think it was when, I forget which visit it was to Washington by which Saudi. I don't recall. It was a crown prince sort of thing. Hume said the most embarrassing assignment he ever had to undertake in Saudi Arabia was to go to the chief of Royal protocol and tell them that Blair House could house 12 people in the official party, and beyond that the Saudis would have to turn to the many hotels in Washington of which there was a wide selection. After the Saudis had provided four hotels for the Nixon party, Hume found this a very embarrassing message to convey.

One of my side jobs-additional duties-during my time there was to be the gift returner. Jim felt very strongly about these lavish gifts that the Saudis were giving to VIP visitors. They would give silver incense burners, gold khanjars, the curved Saudi daggers. Lavish gifts. Jim explained to the Saudis that our law required that these gifts be turned over to, I think, the GAO, isn't it?

Q: I don't know.

CECIL: ....for disposal at auction. A public auction! He said, "The recipient can't treat these gifts in the spirit you are conferring them. Why don't you just find a more modest way to express your courtesy and your esteem?" At one point he said to the chief of protocol, "Why don't you, for instance, offer to make a charitable donation to the visitor's favorite charity? Instead of giving a $5,000 gold dagger, why doesn't the king give $5,000 to the American Cancer Society or the American Heart Association?" if that's what the visitor would designate. The chief of protocol was aghast. He said, "King Faisal could never give $5,000 to the American Heart Association! It would be unworthy! King Faisal would have to give $100,000 to the American Heart Association! It's much cheaper to give a $5,000 dagger!"

When Senator Percy of Illinois came, I was control officer for that visit. Ahmad Zaki Yamani gave Senator Percy a beautiful set of prayer beads made of Red Sea coral. At the dinner that evening at our political counselor's house-he was having the dinner. I didn't know why Jim didn't do it. Jim and Percy were there, and Percy opened this little box with these beautiful prayer beads. He said, "Jim, what do you think these are worth?" He was in accord with Jim's policy about not keeping gifts that exceeded our limits.

None of us knew what they were worth, but the box was a well know Jeddah jeweler, and so I was told go down the next morning to the jeweler and find out that these cost, and then we'll see if the senator can keep them. I went down, and I found that these prayer beads cost $3,000. When I went back and delivered the message, Percy said, "By all means, you will have to return them." Jim said, "I'll explain it to my good friend Ahmad" And that's what happened. I returned many gifts to royal protocol. When Jim confronted the visitors with the harsh facts that they couldn't keep these things, most of them weren't going to take issue with him. I was sent back to protocol with many gifts.

I remember the first time I did this I went in to a mid-level official, I think it was a gold dagger, and I said, "This was given to somebody." I explained our law. The Saudi looked at me and said, "It's blemished, it's tarnished, it's scratched." I said, "No, no. It's beautiful. It's absolutely beautiful, but we're not allowed to take it." He said, "There must be something wrong with it. Show me." I showed him, and he reached for the phone. He reached the chief of protocol and said, "The American here is returning this gift! It came as a gift to someone the day before." The chief of protocol knew very well our ambassador's views, and he must have explained it to the mid-level official. When the conversation was over, he said, "OK, I understand," and he took it. I had several of these encounters returning gifts.

I was in Saudi Arabia when King Faisal was assassinated on March 25, 1975. I had just begun that morning a 12-day circular camping trip with my counterpart in the British embassy, my wife and our kids and my colleague's wife and their young child. We drove all day, headed south toward Khamis Mushayt. We had no indication along the way that anything had gone wrong. The towns we passed through seemed normal. When we reached our campsite for that night, which was a U.S. Geological Survey tent encampment, the caretaker told us that the embassy had called on the radio for me and that I was supposed to call the DCM immediately. I reached Hume Horan, he told me the news, and told me to come back to Jeddah immediately. Since it was nightfall and Jeddah was a full day's drive away, Hume agreed that I should start early the next morning. My British friend had no such orders from his embassy but he obviously wasn't going to go on this 12 day trip alone with his wife and child. So we turned around the next morning. I got back to Jeddah about six in the evening. Jim Akins had already gone to Riyadh for the funeral with most of the embassy staff that he needed. Hume Horan had stayed behind in Jeddah and was out at the airport welcoming the vice president and his plane. The message that the marine gave me was, "Go home, change clothes, and get back here in half an hour. You can sit in on briefing the vice president."

That's what I did. It was just Hume and Vice President Rockefeller and myself. Hume did a masterful job of briefing the vice president about Saudi politics, the family and our relationship. I was very impressed with Nelson Rockefeller. He had background already. He had been well-briefed in Washington, but his questions were very perceptive, very interesting questions. I came away from that meeting feeling Nelson Rockefeller does his homework. He, then, went on right after that meeting to Riyadh to be present at the funeral. King Faisal was buried in an unmarked grave. The Wahhabis do not mark their graves. An important member in the foreign ministry seemed to take the death philosophically. He said in Arabic, "He played his role, and now it's finished." In other words, he helped start us toward modernization, and its God's will. It's finished.

One of the points of contention between Akins and Kissinger was the time when Joseph Kraft, the columnist, a Jewish-American columnist, wanted to come to Saudi Arabia. The Saudis did not like to give visas to Jewish applicants in those days. They needed to be pressured into that. Jim was somewhat reluctant to put a lot of pressure on them, but Joe Sisco who I think probably was Under Secretary for Political Affairs at that point, he basically told Jim Akins, "You need to get Joe Kraft into the country ." Jim convinced the Saudis to give the visa.

After some meetings in Jeddah, Kraft then went Riyadh, and I went not with him but simultaneously. My job was to arrange for Kraft to meet with three Saudi military officers in Riyadh in a little residential facility that by that time we had started renting. After quadrupling oil prices we were going to Riyadh so often that the embassy decided to rent a residential apartment there which we shared, and the Saudis didn't object. I arranged for Joe Kraft to talk with these three Saudi military officers because he wanted to get a feel for what their attitudes were toward the royal family and modernization and progress in the kingdom. The Saudis were very guarded. They were polite, they came, and they talked. They were guarded in what they said because they didn't want to get into trouble.

Joe Kraft played a role later which we'll talk about in our next interview when we talk about my time on the Saudi desk in Washington and the end of Jim Akins's tenure in Saudi Arabia. I'll just make this point now at this point. Maybe we've pretty much covered the highlights of my time there.

Q: Okay. We'll pick this up the next time. You went back to Washington and were the Saudi desk officer. You were there from when to when?

CECIL: I was Saudi desk officer from the summer of '75 to the summer of '77. This was Jim Akins and Hume Horan who made that happen. They wanted me to do that because obviously I was steeped in Saudi affairs by that point.

Q: Okay, we'll pick it up then.

Q: Today is the 6th of February 2008. After a long hiatus... How long has it been-a couple of years?

CECIL: You mean since we talked?

Q: Yes.CECIL: I don't know, two or three months maybe. I can't remember the date, but we got started in the early winter or late fall after I came back from Libya last summer. Today we'll cover my five years in Washington from 1975 to 1980. I'd like to put that in context before we get into some of the details.

Washington: NEA/ARP and PM/SAS

I came back to Washington in the summer of 1975 basically after nine years overseas. My only time in Washington in that nine year period had been 11 months at FSI to study Swahili and French, but I didn't have a so-called "real" job in the Department, so this was my first time to work in the Department after having served in Kuwait, Zanzibar, Beirut and Jeddah. These five years were extremely important to me in the development of my career in getting a better overall grasp of Foreign Service work.

First, they showed me the importance of the geographic bureaus and how they are, in my views, the heart of the Department. They also allowed me to see the role of a country desk officer. They exposed me to bureau coordination and policy management. One reason for that was the assistant secretary of NEA at the time, Roy Atherton, allowed any member of the bureau to attend his weekly staff meetings with his country directors. I think they were weekly. I may be wrong, but anyway, the door was open. The seats around the side of the room were available for any of us. We could come and observe how Roy coordinated with his country directors and the other DAS's (Deputy Assistant Secretaries) in the bureau. That gave me a feeling for some of the personalities involved, people like Spike Dubbs, who was later killed in Afghanistan, Marshall Wiley who later became ambassador to Oman, Morris Draper and other people that were well known in the bureau at the time. They were one way or another role models. It was nice to get a feel for the personal attitudes toward the issues we were dealing with.

The second thing that the five years did is it exposed me after my two years as desk officer to the role of the functional bureaus. I went from Saudi desk officer to the political-military bureau where I spent the next two years in charge of arms sales and security assistance for Africa. This showed me how the functional bureaus worked to ensure the consistency in our policy worldwide or at least to make geographic bureaus build a strong and compelling case were we to depart from what I might call "global norms." The geographic bureaus sometimes want to do things to facilitate our relationship with countries, and the functional bureaus are there to be the guardians of the ramifications of these exceptions to policy, I'll call them. That was very educational for me. My fifth year in Washington was a year on the Hill as a Congressional Fellow where I worked for Congressman Jim Leach and Senator Bill Proxmire. We can go into more details about that. That gave me a wonderful year to see the congressional interaction with the Department. I learned a lot about that.

Q: Now let's get down to details. In 1975 from the perspective of being the desk... In the first place, could you describe how many desk officers for Saudi Arabia were there? A number of you? What was the Saudi Arabian contingent?

CECIL: At that time our relationship with Saudi Arabia was still in a process of transformation. We had had the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, the quadrupling of oil prices in November of that year, and then the efforts to "recycle" is the word we used: to recycle all the Saudi money that was coming into the Saudi treasury by gaining as many contracts for American countries as we could. We had a major arms sales program, also. The whole American government discovered Saudi Arabia overnight. We had many, many visitors during my time in Jeddah as I described in our previous session.

Nevertheless, the Department staffing of a function was slow to keep pace, so I was the only desk officer for Saudi Arabia at the time. We did, of course, have a country director for the Arabian peninsula and a deputy country director for the Arabian peninsula.

Q: Who were they?

CECIL: When I arrived the country director was Fran Dickman who later went on to be ambassador to Kuwait and to the UAE, He was succeeded after, I guess, a year by Ambassador Joe Twinam, who came back from his tour in Bahrain. The deputy director in the early part of that time under Fran was John Countryman who later became ambassador to Oman and asked me to come and be his DCM. I attributed that to our working together in NEA/ARP. John was succeeded by a fellow... whose name I believe was Richard Aherne, but I could be wrong on that. He was not an Arabist, and I know those of us who were tended to downplay his role in the office because we didn't think he knew the region very well.

In any case, in addition to that the country director had a desk officer for the two Yemens and Oman. I can't think who did Qatar and Bahrain and the UAE, but it was a relatively small office. So there were three desk officers plus the country director and the deputy country director.

I want to say before you formulate your question a little point I found in my notes just to illustrate how busy we were. One day in September of 1975 I kept a little log to satisfy my own curiosity of phone calls. I found that I had 28 incoming phone calls that day from the outside, not counting calls from inside the Department itself. It maybe gives a little bit of a feel for the degree of public interest in U.S.-Saudi relations at that time.

Q: What happens when you get a phone call from outside? What generally were they asking about? How could you reply?

CECIL: A lot of the calls were from businessmen who maybe more properly should have started at the Department of Commerce, but on the other hand I think they realized that the State Department had more knowledge about conditions on the ground in Saudi Arabia than Commerce did. Commerce was working hard to educate itself and respond to the public, and I often went to the Department of Commerce and participated in briefings or panel discussions that Commerce would organize for American businessmen. One favorite topic that I had a little set speech to give about was whether it was necessary to pay under-the-table bribes to win contracts in Saudi Arabia because there were a lot of stories that it was necessary.

My answer to that was the answer Jim Akins had always given: "If we have any reason to believe that an American company is paying under the table money to obtain contracts, then this embassy will do nothing to assist you in your effort. If you play by the rules as they should be and if your operations are all honest and above board, this embassy will do everything in its power to help you win contracts in this country." That was my message to the business community, perhaps a little bit naively but nevertheless by and large, I think it was true. Later, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act helped ensure that it was true. I told them that and I said, "You can get large, important contracts in Saudi Arabia without paying bribes to influential people."

Q: There was a system, too, in Saudi Arabia, wasn't there? That they really had to have an in-country sponsor which in a sense... It was perfectly legitimate to somebody who knows the territory, but that takes care of the problem.

CECIL: That gets into the gray area because some of those sponsors were quite capable of providing assistance as needed. They could recruit labor; they were very good at working a bureaucracy; they could move paperwork. Others were less good and delivered less so yes, you're right, that gets you into the gray area.

To go back to your answer, how did my day go? A lot of it was that. We also had a lot of calls about visa issues even though there's the consular affairs bureau. Nevertheless, I think people by default turned to the desk. It was a wide variety of issues. The workload was heavy. I went in early and stayed late. It was common in those days. I chafed a little under that workload because I felt that the Department should have done better by adding one or two people to the country directorate. I thought that those of us who were there were unfairly carrying the burden that the Department should have recognized and already solved.

Some of the issues that we dealt with? There was a big issue at that time in late 1975 that maybe went on into '76: visas for Saudi students coming into the United States. From the beginning of the Saudi relationship with the U.S., when they first started coming here for college, they were given diplomatic visas. A2 visas. By the mid '70s the numbers there were considerable-several thousand-and this issue attracted attention. The decision was made in the Department that they would have to end the practice of giving diplomatic visas to students. That was also done for Kuwaitis as well as Saudis. That took some of my time the first year I was there.

There were infinite requests for briefing papers for senior officials. As I mentioned so many people in the American government were discovering Saudi Arabia. There were lots of high level visits, and we were constantly either clearing or turning out briefing papers for high level people both in State and elsewhere in the government.

I remember one request for a briefing paper that was an example of the kind of request that really irritated me as a young officer maybe not fully accustomed yet to Washington ways. Mike Mansfield paid a visit to Saudi Arabia. He was Senate Majority Leader at the time, I think was his title. When he came back he was going to have a meeting with President Ford. We received a request from the 7th floor saying, "Please draw up talking points for President Ford to use when he meets with Senator Mansfield to discuss the senator's visit to Saudi Arabia."

I went to Fran Dickman and I said, "This is a lot of nonsense. These two men have worked with each other on the Hill for 20 years, maybe more. They're friends and colleagues. The president doesn't need talking points to ask Senator Mansfield about this trip to Saudi Arabia. He's going to put his feet on the desk and lean back in this chair and say, "Well, Mike. What's it like dealing with those Ay-rabs?'" Fran just shook his head. He said, "The requests won't go away. Anything the 7th floor sends down you've got to heed and send back up." He dashed out something quickly and sent it on up. He said, "It's quicker to do it than to try to kill the request." I had to get used to that sort of thing.

There was another one when our new consul general to Dhahran came to see me and tell me that his good friend Carol Lays who was then the Director General of the Foreign Service (the chief personnel-now we say human resources-officer) was going to swear him in as consul general. This is a little unusual, but I guess it was a tribute to his relationship with Carol Lays. I said, "That's just wonderful." A day or two later I got a request from the Director General's office for talking points for the swearing-in ceremony. The gentleman who was going out was a man named John Bushnell. He came by and I said, "Really, John, I don't have time to do this sort of thing. You said she's doing this because she knows you and she's your good friend. Surely she doesn't need talking points to swear in her good friend." He took the request, and he drafted the talking points for his own swearing-in which is maybe the way it should have been. Those kinds of requests always irritated me.

Q: We're coming to the oil crisis in the aftermath of the October war of '73. How did this impact on the desk?

CECIL: Impact. One thing that came out of the oil crisis and the effort to recycle Saudi petro-dollars was the creation of something we called the Joint Economic Commission which was actually headquartered at the Treasury Department. I probably discussed this in our last interview. It was a result of Jim Akins and Secretary Simon putting their heads together and coming up with a mechanism to help American companies get contracts and also to help Saudi Arabia to develop itself and bring it into the modern world.

I spent a fair amount of time coordinating with the Joint Economic Commission. They did feel relatively independent. They thought they had their own mandate, but State was concerned that we monitor closely their activities, and that was part of my job. If I found anything that I thought was alarming, I would go to Fran Dickman, and he would then go up to the front office of the bureau and they would talk about it at a higher level. Working with the Treasury department was part of my job.

There was something else I did. This maybe isn't a direct answer to your question. I felt a need to be in touch on a more informal basis with other members of our government dealing with various aspects of our relationship with Saudi Arabia. I started organizing a monthly luncheon at the Foreign Service Club across the street for roughly my peers-my colleagues-from several agencies around town. I found the list when I was reviewing these years. I had about 20 people or so that I would call every month. They were in State, USIA, Defense Department, both ISA-International Security Affairs-and DSA, the arms sales part of defense, CIA, OMB. I gradually got to know staffers on the House and Senate foreign relations committees and sometimes personal staffers of other members who had special interests in Saudi Arabia and people like John Duke Anthony. I forget what his job was at that time. He for many years has been president of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations. He still is today.

I would usually get about a dozen of these 20 or so who were able to attend. We all found these very useful meetings just to get together around a round table and have a casual lunch. The Foreign Service Club had a little room upstairs that they gave us for that purpose so we could have our own talk without worrying about who else was around. That was another part of my introduction to Washington: getting to know people in the other agencies and how these agencies interrelated with State.

There was something that I want to note for the record. It related to Jim Akins. I think in my last meeting with you, I talked about the tension between Jim Akins and Secretary Kissinger over policy and how to deal with the Saudis. That eventually led to the firing of Jim Akins, the early termination of his assignment as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. As it happened, that occurred not long after I began my work as Saudi desk officer.

I told you I used to go in early. One morning I got the Washington Post and I was eating an early breakfast in my home. It was August 19, 1975 and I found on the op-ed page an article by Joseph Kraft the columnist. In that article Kraft said that Jim Akins was going to be replaced in Saudi Arabia by Bill Porter who was currently our ambassador to Canada and that Tom Enders would be the new ambassador to Canada. I think Enders at the time was in some position in Europe, not ambassador to a country but something like the European community or the economic commission or something. I forget the exact title. I commented to my wife, "Gee, this is a real surprise." Jim Akins was in Washington on home leave and had been in my office the previous day. I said Jim was at my desk and he didn't mention this. "That's really curious," I said to my wife.

I thought about it all the way on the bus as I was riding into town. I had to use the bus in those days before Metro, and by the time I got to my desk, about 8:00, I said, "Maybe Jim doesn't know! I'm going to call him." So I called him at home and said, "Have you seen the Washington Post yet this morning?" He said, "No. It's still out on the porch." I said, "Joseph Kraft says you're going to be replaced by Bill Porter." There was a slight pause, and Jim said, "Ohhhhh? I guess I better go get the paper." That was the end of that conversation.

At 9:00 that morning was Roy Atherton's bureau staff meeting which I attended. There was an exchange between Roy Atherton and Fran Dickman. Fran said Jim had called him, had asked about the article, but had told Fran that several journalists had called the house to ask if it was true. Jim had told them, "No, it's not true and the reason it's not true is that I haven't been informed, so it can't be true." Roy said to Fran, "Well, I'm seeing the Secretary at 10:00 right after this meeting. Maybe you should tell Jim that if I were in his position I would be a little less categoric in answering the journalists' questions. I'll know after my meeting with the Secretary."

That showed me that the Assistant Secretary himself didn't know for sure, hadn't been in on this and, in fact, it turned out that the article which was clearly the result of a conversation between Kissinger and Kraft or maybe someone like Larry Eagleburger who was on Kissinger's staff at the time. It had been a plant. Jim Akins was allowed to return to Saudi Arabia, and he twisted slowly in the wind until December 8th when he finally left. From August until December he was basically a lame duck ambassador. It put him in a very difficult position.

I in fact wrote a draft editorial for the Foreign Service Journal. I don't know if you do like they do up on the Hill and accept items for the record, but I found the text. If you want to put it into the interview, we can do that. The thrust of my editorial which they did not print, I have to say, was that it was deplorable for an ambassador to learn through a newspaper columnist that he was going to be replaced. It wasn't only Akins. It was also Porter and Tom Enders as well although maybe they had been let in. I suppose they had, but Akins clearly had not. I pointed out in my editorial that this was the second U.S. ambassador in a row to learn through the press that he was going to be replaced. That had happened to Nick Thatcher as we talked about in my earlier interview with you. In this case he learned through a Beirut Lebanese newspaper that he was going to be replaced by Jim Akins. I said this is no way to treat our ambassador.

Q: Within the little community of the State Department, how did you find they viewed the tension between Kissinger and Akins? How was Akins regarded?

CECIL: Akins was first of all a very capable Arabist. He spoke good Arabic and knew Arab culture quite well. He was an internationally recognized authority on oil. He had worked in both the Department and White House office dealing with the issues just before he was sent to Saudi Arabia. He was sent there because Washington recognized he had expertise in this area. He was known, though, to be a bit aloof and sometimes curt. He did not come across as a warm, open, glad-hander kind of person, not a backslapper. He had his views, and he would be quick to tell you what his views were.

I have to say, as I think I did about my years in Saudi Arabia with him, he was extremely loyal to his own staff. We had absolute freedom to question everything. He had always promoted open and free discussions inside the embassy. Washington, I think, regarded him as a difficult ambassador to manage because he often questioned his instructions.

Q: This brings up a question on the desk" Did you feel the hand of AIPAC, the American-Israeli Political Action Committee, or what can be termed " the Jewish lobby?"

CECIL: Certainly it was always a presence, always a factor. I might be hard pressed to come up 30 years later with precise examples, but there was clearly an effort to disrupt the U.S.-Saudi relationship. There was a constant effort to emphasize the bad side of Saudi Arabia, the closed society, the bad elements of the monarchy, the unreliability of what AIPAC might have considered to be an unstable political system. The years have shown it has been pretty stable.

I don't recall any overt interference in my work at my level, but I'm sure it was a constant concern at the front office level. It's hard for me to be more precise on that at this time. We have Congressman Paul Findley's wonderful book They Dared to Speak Out which documents in great detail the efforts of the pro-Israel lobby to stifle discussion of any critical aspect of our relationship with Israel and to undermine our relationship with the Arabs. That book was written by Findley after he was defeated in one of his congressional re-election campaigns because he'd begun to speak out publicly of a need for a generally balanced policy in the Middle East. I can't say that it affected me much at my level. More recently, The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy by John Mearsheimer and Walt brings this subject up to date.

I've a couple of other vignettes. I might just say again to look at the whole two-year period, after Jim Akins left, Bill Porter did follow him as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. I had the pleasure of meeting Ambassador Porter and participating in his briefings as he got ready to go out. Going to Saudi Arabia from Canada might have been seen as a step down. Porter had been what we called the "deputy ambassador"-I think the only time we used that term-in Vietnam, before Canada, so he was at the height of his career and a very senior diplomat. He told me that when Secretary Kissinger had asked him to take the position in Saudi Arabia that he told the Secretary he would take the job, but he had certain conditions. One was that Jeddah be upgraded from a Class 3 post to a Class 1 post. (We have four classes of posts.) The Secretary said, "No problem with that." Secondly, Porter said he wanted to arrive in Saudi Arabia on a military aircraft. He wanted the visible evidence of our military support and of special status by arriving on a military aircraft. The secretary said, "We can arrange that as well," I know there was a third condition but I must admit I've forgotten it now. Porter's instructions were to go out there and put the Saudis on notice that we are very serious about this relationship but there are not going to be any favors or any special treatment handed out to Saudi Arabia just because it has a lot of oil. It was basically a get-tough policy. Don't be as friendly as Jim Akins had been. Porter fulfilled that role for a year or a little bit more, and then he left. I guess at that point he finally did retire.

He was replaced by South Carolina Governor John West. John West had been the first of the southern governors to endorse Jimmy Carter's race for the nomination for the democratic party for the presidency. He was close to Carter. I also got to participate in Governor West's briefings as he was getting ready to go out. I was transitioning out of the job at the time. The new desk officer, Fred Gerlach, and I actually assisted John West in all of his preparation. Governor West told us that Jimmy Carter had offered him the position of Secretary of Commerce in his administration because of his early endorsement.

Governor West had as governor led a trade and investment mission to Saudi Arabia, part of that U.S. effort to get to know Saudi Arabia. He told President Carter that he was so fascinated with Saudi Arabia that he would rather be U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia than Secretary of Commerce. So Carter said, "That's fine." He was the first political appointee to be ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Up to that time our ambassadors had been career officers, and I think every one of them was an Arabist. Nick Thatcher maybe was not actually an Arabist, but at least he had some experience in the area.

Governor West was a wonderful person to work with, and although I was not the desk officer once he got out there, I certainly got a feel for the man during his preparations. I know he was very well received by the Saudis. He had all the qualities of Southern gentility and interest in your personal situation, your family. He quickly got to know the key princes in the Saudi royal family and other key ministers, and he would know what schools their children were going into and what their own connections with the States were. He was a real effective politician in dealing with the royal family. He never pretended to know more than he really knew. He talked about the Arab world in a very cautious manner and always turned to his staff when he needed help and information. There are many wonderful stories and examples about that.

I was privileged to be on the desk during this period of great transition. It's part of the transition in our relationship, I guess, from Jim Akins to Bill Porter to Governor West. We've had many political appointee ambassadors since that time.

Q: Had you seen or felt that we were being overly deferential under Akins or others at the time? What prompted Kissinger to set forward this tougher policy?

CECIL: It didn't seem to me that we were overly deferential. What I saw from being in Jeddah was that the relationship between Jim Akins and the Saudis was so close that I thought he was extremely effective in dealing with the Saudis and getting what we needed from them. They confided in him.

Jim was especially close to Ahmad Zaki Yamani, the oil minister at the time. Jim could not roll back the quadrupling of oil prices. That was, after all, an OPEC decision, and the shah of Iran was quite influential in that as well. I don't know what pressure we put on the shah at that time. I didn't feel ever that Jim was in any way selling our own interests short. I thought he was the best person for the task at hand.

Q: This many have been Kissinger's rationale for getting rid of one ambassador. Kissinger did not like to be upstaged. In the Saudi context, he was upstaged.

CECIL: That's possible. Certainly I don't think Kissinger liked his views to be questioned. Jim Akins had never had any hesitation about questioning his instructions, really, if he thought this wasn't the way to achieve our interests or objectives. I can see why Washington would react negatively to some ambassador who's constantly coming back and saying, "I don't think we should do this this way," or. "Maybe we shouldn't do this at all."

Q: Did you get any feel for the effectiveness of the Saudi embassy in Washington?

CECIL: A bit. They were quite a sleepy little embassy when I went on the desk, but they sent a new ambassador in November of 1975, Ambassador Alireza, who was U.S.- educated. He had had an American wife who wrote a book that all Americans living in Saudi Arabia at the time knew and most had read. It was called, At the Drop of a Veil.

In that marriage Ambassador Alireza had, I believe, four children with his American wife. The marriage eventually ended in divorce. The mother left Saudi Arabia with the children and came back to the United States, yet eventually when they became adults the children all went back to Saudi Arabia to join their father. I think because that's where the assurance of a high standard of living was. He was quite a wealthy businessman and came from a well known commercial family.

One of the first things Ambassador Alireza did when he arrived in Washington was he shook up the Saudi embassy by extending the official working hours. They had been working from ten to three, but Alireza got them working nine to five. Those members of his staff had a hard time adjusting to that. I remember writing to my sister, "this is going to put the Saudis into rush hour traffic in Washington, D.C. for the first time ever! They won't have experienced this before."

Once Ambassador Alireza was in Washington, I think the role of the embassy became more important. Not as important as it later did under Prince Bandar. When Prince Bandar became ambassador, then clearly the Saudi Embassy-or at least the ambassador himself-took on a major role. The Saudis preferred to deal through Prince Bandar in Washington rather than with our embassy in Saudi Arabia. It was a gradual thing getting into gear. Before '75 it was a somnolent little embassy that didn't do much, but it became more active under Alireza.

Q: How were the Saudi students in the States? Did they cause any particular problems for you?

CECIL: No. I would say no in general, no particular problems for me. Certainly at my level there were occasional issues. I remember the case of a traffic accident in which a Saudi driver rear-ended a car in California with some American college age students in it. The result was that the young man on the right rear seat of the car that was rear-ended was rendered a paraplegic. I received calls and some correspondence from this young man's father asking my advice as Saudi desk officer-here you go, you never know what's going to happen when the phone rings-on how to deal with this issue. The father wanted to know whether he should hire a lawyer and try to get a settlement against the Saudi student driver or whether some other approach would be more effective.

I was less guarded in my advice than I might have been later in my life, but I gave him my best advice. I said, "Really I think that if you go to court, your chances of winning are something only a lawyer could advise you on. Personally, I think you'll have better luck if you try a personal appeal to the Saudi government." At the time I'm not sure who I recommended, but I suggested that he appeal to the Saudi government as a father rather than as a litigant and that he make the case that his son would require medical care for the rest of his life, which he would. He had been an athlete, a basketball player. It sounded like he had quite an active life, and now he couldn't ever get out of bed on his own again.

Sometimes Saudis did have accidents or had encounters with the law, but most of that did not come to us for resolution. This was a particular case that still sticks in my mind all these years later. I wonder what ever happened. I don't know the course that the father pursued, and I don't know the outcome.

Q: Did you get involved with-this is more the consular side-American women who married Saudis when in the States, who went back to Saudi Arabia, had children, and then wanted to get out? I had it when I was vice-consul in Iran. How did you get your kids out?

CECIL: I never got involved in those cases. I'm not aware that they were that numerous in my time. Certainly you heard about them. Some cases maybe would get press attention, but I never had to get involved in any such cases.

Q: Are there any other issues we should pick up in the '75 to '77 period?

CECIL: I think probably not. The only other point I might say is, again, part of the value of these years in Washington was that I got to participate in a presidential transition. As Jimmy Carter came into office, the team came to the Department, and we made all kinds of briefing papers. It was interesting to participate in the process of trying to decide what the new President and the new Secretary of State needed to know.

Around that time-I don't remember the exact month-Fran Dickman left and Joe Twinam took over as country director. He was also a good Arabist and very good to work for, very supportive of his staff. I remember one meeting early in the Carter administration that Joe had come back from, I think an NSC meeting somewhere outside the building. He had been in this meeting where there had been a couple of young new appointees to some position. Joe came back shaking his head. Joe was from South Carolina, I believe, and he had a good southern accent. He said, talking about one participant, "That fella was so new. The only phone number he knows is the White House." I thought, "Yes, this is part of what we have to deal with when a new administration comes into office." You have a wonderful opportunity to form the issues and educate them. I think we've probably covered most of my faint memories.

I wanted functional bureau experience. I looked at several jobs but in the end the one that seemed most attractive to me was the one in the political-military bureau. It was the office at that time called PM/SAS: Security Assistance and Sales. The office director was an officer named Tony Kochanek, and I found myself in a wonderful position. I had all of Africa except Egypt under my supervision as far as arms sales and the assistance of FMS (Foreign Military Sales) financing was concerned. It gave me a position to follow developments in Africa which interested me greatly.

Q: When you say Africa, does this include the northern tier?

CECIL: Yes, every country but Egypt.

Q: So you had Morocco.

CECIL: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia. We didn't have military relationships with all of Africa, but there were probably eight or ten countries I would say, thinking back, where we had important military sales and training relationships. They were as you would expect the most important countries on the continent. It was a wonderful vantage point for me. I quickly developed a good working relationship with my counterpart in DSAA (I think that stood for Defense Security Assistance Agency), a fellow named Peter Sommer. We would talk on the phone several times a day about a proposed arms sale or security systems issues. Peter was a very dedicated civil servant professional. In fact, he later became ambassador to Malta after several years in London as the Defense Department's civilian representative on our embassy staff in London.

We worked very closely together, and I certainly learned a lot. It helped me deepen my political-military knowledge that I had begun to acquire in Saudi Arabia during those times when I was pol-mil officer. In February of '78 Peter and I made a trip to several countries in Africa where we had important sales relationships. We went to Sudan, to Kenya, to Botswana. We arranged the itinerary so we could have a three-day weekend in South Africa on our way to Botswana, so we got to see Johannesburg and Pretoria and got to talk to our embassy in Pretoria. We went on to Zaire, Cameroon and Nigeria on that trip. There were a number of issues that were interesting and important and, in fact, that led me to write my first dissent channel memo. In fact, I wrote two in my time in PM over policy issues. It was after Morocco had marched into the Western Sahara and asserted its claim.

Q: This was the Green march?

CECIL: Yes. They called it the Green March. We did not recognize Morocco's attempt to incorporate the Western Sahara into the Kingdom of Morocco. It affected our militarysales relationship. We would only sell Morocco equipment that it needed for self defense because the international community did not recognize the Moroccan peaceful invasion of the Western Sahara. We began to put restrictions on things that we would sell Morocco if we thought it could be used to control the Western Sahara.

I felt this was the wrong policy. I said, "There's nothing more in America's interest than that Morocco gain full control of the Western Sahara." At the time they were fighting the polizario movement which was a communist-supported nationalist movement with a lot of assistance provided through Algeria, which had a traditional rivalry with Morocco. I said, "It's short sighted if we don't assist Morocco in its efforts to gain control of this territory. Do we want to be dealing with the people of the Democratic Republic of the Western Sahara at some point in the future?" The Soviets had been pushed out of Guinea not long before. (They had use of airport facilities in Guinea.) The Guinean government, I suppose with our prodding, had terminated that agreement.

The Soviets were looking around for other places, talking to the government of Cape Verde. I argued that if the Western Sahara became independent, the Soviets would be the first ones in town trying to get their landing rights for their aircraft headed toward Cuba and other places father south. I thought it was a short-sighted policy. I wrote a memo which got a polite response, but we maintained the policy, distancing ourselves during that period. Jimmy Carter was still new in office, and human rights was a very important component of his administration's approach.

I would have to say, looking back, our relationship with Morocco seems to have survived the strain, and they still have the Western Sahara, never fully resolved. They've never had a referendum that the international community wanted them to have but effectively they have gained control. Mauritania relinquished its claim to the southern third of the Western Sahara, and that also came under Moroccan administration.

There was another issue during that time that I wrote a dissent memo on, and that was a Horn of Africa issue. Kenyan officials were coming to Washington. I don't believe it was the president, but certainly the foreign minister was coming, and we had to prepare briefing papers. This was probably out of the box and maybe off the wall, but Kenya was having some trouble controlling the Somali inhabitants of what was called the Northeastern Province close to Somalia. I said, "We should be trying to persuade the Kenyan government that they should simply relinquish their claim to that part of Kenya. They should turn it over to Somalia because the Somalis in that part of Kenya would never feel loyal Kenyan citizens. They would always want to be Somali." It was a waste to see Kenya spending hundreds of millions of dollars on military equipment trying to control that part of the country. I thought it would be best for the region as a whole and for Kenya especially if we could make them see it in my light.

Of course, nothing happened. We didn't ever suggest that idea. I suppose it was so totally unacceptable to the Kenyan government that our embassy would never have considered doing that. Over the years we have seen that Somalia, in fact, has fallen apart. The desire of the inhabitants of the northeastern part of Kenya to be Somali maybe is not so strong. Maybe I overestimated it. They may be quite happy as Kenyans although with recent events in Kenya, who knows what they are thinking. By and large, Somalia has not held together, and what I saw was a strong irredentist movement that would seek to regain the Ogaden from Ethiopia and probably seek to incorporate the northern part of Kenya. It never happened because of their own internal problems.

Q: From a political-military side, you were talking about arms sales.

CECIL: Arms sales and loans to buy arms and also the IMET training program: International Military Education and Training.

Q: In Latin America for a long time we had a rather strict injunction: no jet aircraft. We didn't want the Latin American countries to get into more and more hi-tech equipment which would be squandered trying to... It didn't look like any great war between the two. Do we have any policy about limitations of what we would be sold to Africa?

CECIL: We always had to examine the question of "first introduction" into an area. Would a sale be a first introduction of this new higher level of technology or capability into a region? The case that comes to mind is the proposed sale of C-130 tankers to Morocco. It's partly related to the earlier issue I was just talking about. My recollection is that we had not sold the tanker version of the C-130 to any North African country and probably not to any African country at all.

Selling the tanker to Morocco first of all might assist them in their efforts to control the Western Sahara because it might give more range to their fighter aircraft and their bombers. There was always the question of how Algeria would react. We were quite concerned over our relationship with Algeria. There were billions and billions of dollars of future contracts on the horizon in Algeria to help develop their oil and gas resources. There was some concern that if we alienated the Algerian government they would turn elsewhere, and our business community would lose out, and selling refueling tankers to Morocco was a perfect example of how we might risk irritating the Algerian government.

I'm sorry to say I don't remember the outcome of that issue. I know that the bureau, PM, opposed the sale. That was my position. My instructions were to oppose the sale. In the end, I'm not sure what happened.

Q: How about the role of Libya? How did that play? Were we trying to balance? We've seen Libya one as a menace and two, we've got to help its neighbors ___ or not?

CECIL: By '77,- '79 which are the years we are talking about now, our relationship with Libya was turning increasingly sour but had not yet reached the depths that it did reach around '80 or '81. That was when the Libyans burned our embassy in Tripoli. The really noteworthy acts of terrorism were still years in the future, but the relationship was turning sour, and we had by that time already completed our withdrawal from Wheelus Air Force Base, which was one of the first things that Muammar Qadhafi wanted from us. We'd already begun to negotiate the withdrawal from Wheelus under King Idris, so it wasn't strictly a Qadhafi initiative, but he ensured that it happened. Honestly speaking, I don't recall spending time on Libyan issues. We certainly weren't selling them military equipment at that time. The relationship was negative enough that we weren't going to do this.

Q: They may be still sitting somewhere, a bunch of C-130's, not tankers but the C-130 transport aircraft, which the Libyans had paid for and as far as I know have never been delivered.

CECIL: That's true. I guess the policy issues there were already dealt with before I came to the desk. I wasn't involved in that, but you're quite right: We decided to deny delivery, and those aircraft are still to this day at Lockheed in Georgia and, in fact, during my time as chargï¿½ in Tripoli which was November of 2006 until July of 2007 we actually sent a Libyan and U.S. military team to Georgia to assess the condition of those aircraft. The Libyans are trying to decide whether to refurbish them and bring them back, or whether they should be written off because they're so old they are unreliable. We would now allow that now that our relationship is a good one. But you're quite right. That decision was not made during my two years, so I think it was probably before me.

Q: Looking at parts of Africa-the huge group of states that were basically Francophone-were we deferring to the French on those or were we competitive with the French military?

The only former French colony that I can recall where we were developing a military relationship at that time was Cameroon. I mentioned that as one of the countries we visited-Peter Sommer and I-in February of '78. The Cameroonians I think wanted to diversify their sources of supply. They wanted to buy artillery from us. That was the issue we discussed in that visit, 155 millimeter artillery. I can't say that I saw any directed effort on our part to develop markets in former French colonies.

We did have modest programs where we sold some C-130's to Niger, for instance, sometime during the '70s I think it was. I'm not aware of a campaign in the sense that we were trying to break into a French market. I think the countries on their own probably wanted to diversify, and they had an interest in American technology and American training. The main problem usually was they didn't have the money, and we weren't willing to devote a lot of money to helping them. Our important programs were with Kenya and Nigeria.

We were interested in Zaire, of course. All of our activities in Africa were relatively modest where resources are concerned.

Q: I take it that in the Carter administration that South Africa was off limits.

CECIL: Right. Absolutely.

Q: You mentioned Nigeria and Botswana. I would think that these would be encroaching on British arms sales.

CECIL: Maybe the British would see it that way. I don't remember that as ever being a consideration nor an issue. Perhaps it entered into the U.S.-UK relationship. I don't know if the British ever raised it with us, but nothing ever came to my attention along those lines.

Again, our involvement was always rather modest, and there was not a concerted effort to push anybody our. We were not trying to replace the former colonial powers, but it was obviously in our interest to develop relationships and open up channels of communication. Our IMET programs were an important vehicle for that.

Q: Did you find that the newly created human rights bureau under Pat Darien, was this a thorn in your side? You were trying to sell weapons of mass destruction, and they were trying to bring universal peace to areas or whatever you want to call it. In other words, it seemed to have two different attitudes. Did you find that this was a problem?

CECIL: I don't think anything we were doing would fall under the category of "weapons of mass destruction", as that term is usually used. Except for the Moroccan case, I don't remember it as being a real issue. Perhaps it was, and I can remember from other years, we'll talk about in the future in the late '80s when I was dealing with environmental issues, other functional bureaus could be major obstacles in the path of trying to achieve things we wanted to achieve. I don't recall the human rights issues being a major obstacle at that time.

Q: Obviously this is no longer your responsibility, but from your contacts with the near eastern bureau... The whole Camp David thing, what was your impression, how that came out?

CECIL: I don't know that my views are of any historical value. I certainly wasn't involved in it, and what I knew mostly was what I read in the papers and perhaps I always thought we had to push the two parties-the Palestinians and the Israelis-toward a solution. I was always in favor of a stronger, more active role in that. Jimmy Carter's success was a wonderful thing in bringing the Egyptians to the table. I obviously thought it was a step in the right direction.

Q: In '79 you had a year in Pearson?

CECIL: It wasn't Pearson, it was the Congressional Fellows program, and the main difference there is that the Congressional Fellows program is a one-year program divided about equally between two members of the Congress. You spend six months with a Congressman and six months with a Senator. In the Pearson program I think you do not divide the assignment. You go to one place, and sometimes this could be a committee as well as a member. I am under the impression sometimes those are more than one year in length. I think sometimes two, but I might be wrong on that.

In those years we sent four Congressional Fellows a year up to the Hill. We had five or six weeks of seminar-type preparation and orientation. It was conducted at SAIS by a couple of authorities, one from SAIS and one from the Brookings Institution across the street, authorities on the Congress and how it worked. They crammed a lot of information into our heads and arranged a lot of meetings on the Hill for us, briefings and meetings. Then we were basically told to go out and find ourselves a job. It was probably the only time in my life I had to go interview for a job! We were free to make the rounds of any members that would see us and discuss what we could contribute to their staff. At that point we had had about five months to offer each member.

I wound up working for Jim Leach in the House to begin. One of my interesting experiences in searching for a job was that I had a chance to sit and talk with Congressman Dick Cheney from Wyoming about 20 or 30 minutes. We concluded that his agenda was more conservative than my interests and might be focusing on different issues, so we didn't pursue that.

Jim Leach was a former Foreign Service Officer, a SAIS graduate who had studied Soviet affairs. After a short time in the Foreign Service-I think he only had two or maybe at most three assignments-he then returned to southeastern lowa, where he was from, to help run the family business, which was a natural gas supply company. I think his father had fallen ill or something. Jim left the Foreign Service, went back to lowa, and shortly entered politics and got himself elected congressman. When I went up I think he was only in his second term at that point. He was a wonderful person to work for.

By contrast, my experience there with Senator Proxmire, which followed Leach, was also wonderful, in a different way. Those were two of the finest men you could find on the Hill to work for, but they were at such different stages of their careers that the experience for someone working in their offices had to be totally different. For instance, Jim Leach had a full time staff member responsible for press relations, and that person was charged with trying to get some kind of a press release with Jim Leach's name on it out every day. Something that Jim was doing had to get out in the press or at least something back to the lowa constituency in the form of a press release for local consumption.

Jim had not decided yet whether he was going to run for the Senate. It was very much on his mind, but another strong candidate-a Republican candidate-in lowa was a very close friend of Jim. I forget his name now, but Jim didn't like the idea of challenging his close friend for the nomination for the Senate seat that was going to come open. Eventually, as we saw, Jim decided to remain in the House, and he had a long career. He was only defeated in the last congressional election, so that means he must have been there for 30 years or more, 35 maybe. He rose to a very important position on a couple of committees.

Bill Proxmire, a Democrat from Wisconsin, was a long-time member. He must have been there maybe 25 years when I joined the office. He was so secure in his seat he didn't even have a press person on his staff. The only thing Bill Proxmire did with the press in mind was the monthly Golden Fleece award. He had one staff member who had several duties, but one of them was to find an example of government waste or government funding of questionable projects, and focus the light of attention on the projects in what he called "The Monthly Golden Fleece" which meant the taxpayer was being fleeced by these stupid government decisions and grants. Other than that, Bill Proxmire made no effort to appease or respond to the press.

Proxmire was already very senior. His staff was smooth and functioned like a well-oiled machine, had very little need for attention from the Senator. He had an excellent legislative assistant and an excellent administrative assistant who ran the daily operation. Proxmire was an extremely conscientious man, very dedicated to his work and to the public interest, and to trying to save American taxpayer money.

The most interesting aspect of being in Proxmire's office was the opportunity to participate in what were called "the debates." The legislative assistant would tell a staff member to research the senator's position on some issue and to try to come up with the most difficult and challenging questions that the staff member could to confront the Senator with as if the Senator were in some public meeting somewhere and some person in the audience stood up and said, "How can you defend this ridiculous vote that you made last week in the Senate on such-and-such?" The staff member was given a week to prepare, and on the Senator's calendar was simply the entry, "debate." Thirty minutes was allowed for one debate a week. The Senator was never told the topic in advance; it was a complete surprise. The staff member would come in and start the dialogue, and the Senator is on notice to try to justify his position. I was able to prepare a couple of debates on Middle Eastern issues. It was very, very interesting to watch the Senator keep his mind agile and informed.

Q: Proxmire came from Michigan, didn't he?

CECIL: Wisconsin.

Q: Where did he stand on Arab-Israeli matters?

CECIL: He had not devoted a lot of attention to them before I came to the office. That was one of my jobs, and that was one of the reasons that the legislative assistant favored taking me on. He saw my expertise as an opportunity to inform the Senator in a topic that he had not devoted a lot of attention to. I wrote a number of papers for him and prepared a couple of debates. He had an open mind, I would say. He was interested in the issues.

I do remember the time that Ambassador Talcott Seelye, who was our ambassador to Syria, came to call on Senator Proxmire. Proxmire had asked some questions about our foreign assistance program in Syria. Ambassador Seelye was concerned about pressure from the Senator against the foreign aid program which was fairly modest, but nevertheless was an important element of our leverage at that time. I prepared a briefing paper for Senator Proxmire, Ambassador Seelye came, I sat in on the meeting, and Ambassador Seelye made a very nice presentation about the importance of our AID program in Syria. He concluded my looking at the Senator and saying, "So therefore, Senator, I hope that you will reconsider any thoughts you have about reducing the size of our program." Proxmire looked at him and said, "Oh, Mr. Ambassador, I don't guess you fully understood my position. I don't want to just reduce that program. I want to terminate it completely." I don't know what the ambassador thought at that point.

Proxmire approached every issue by asking himself whether the money spent was achieving the results that were beneficial to the country. He was a man of great integrity. On one of the Golden Fleece awards he was sued by, I think it was, a researcher. The court found that, in fact, the staff member maybe had not fully prepared the case, and there was a judgment against the Senator. The Senator was defended in this court case by the Department of Justice which is charged with defending Senators at least in certain cases. Senator Proxmire decided that he had to repay the Justice Department the salary cost for the lawyer who had worked on the case, so the proceeds of one of his books were dedicated to repaying the Justice department for defending him in court.

I worked on a lot of appropriations issues because he was interested. I guess he was on the appropriations committee, so I would often give him recommendations on things. Another issue I worked on was an incident that occurred at Sverdlovsk in the Soviet Union. I think it's now Yekaterinburg. This was April in 1979 when a number of people died from anthrax. There was suspicion that the Soviets were developing a germ weapons program and that had been the cause of the accident. I worked on preparing a joint resolution of the Congress which Jim Leach lent support to, on the House side. We actually had this resolution adopted by both houses calling on the Soviets to open up their facilities for investigation and to reveal all information related to this incident. I believe the charge was that more than 200 people had died because of anthrax.

The Soviets stiff-armed us at the time, but many years later, in 1992, Yeltsin confirmed that the deaths had been the results of an accident by researchers trying to develop a germ weapon.

In Jim Leach's office my experience was less focused on foreign policy issues. It was quite a mixture of domestic issues but at the same time Jim was very much involved in the Foreign Service Act of 1980, so I was there at the perfect time to help participate in that.

One issue was the staffing of posts, particularly those that were hard to fill. I remember we asked the Department to provide us with a list of the 20 most difficult posts in the world to staff. The Department didn't want to do that. Eventually, Jim persisted, and we did get a list of 20 difficult-to-staff posts. About 15 of them were in Africa at the time. Jim inserted into the Foreign Service Act a provision to allow for additional pay for serving in hard-to-staff posts. This was Section 2308 called Posts Requiring Special Incentives. The Act of 1980 gave the Department authority to pay an additional 15% above the hardship allowance for service in the difficult-to-staff posts. This was different from Dante Fascell's danger pay which was also put into the act of 1980. Fascell's office and Jim Leach's offices were working closely on these issues.

The provision survived. It was there, and the Department never wanted to use it because of the budgetary impact. I recall as recently as when Skip Gnehm was the Director General of the Foreign Service, the issue of staffing posts came up. I remember writing a note to Skip drawing his attention to this provision. I said Jim Leach always believed in the motivating influence of money. He said, "If you just pay people more, people will come out of the woodwork and will go fill these positions, so let's just recognize reality and offer them more money." Skip replied that of course they were aware of the provision but for budgetary reasons, the Department never wanted to invoke it. More recently in trying to deal with Iraq we've gotten into such new orders of magnitude of financial rewards and extra R&R's and home leaves that maybe it now seems quaint. For probably 25 years the authority to pay an extra 15% was never used by the Department.

Q: Then 1980 is when you left?

CECIL: Right. With time to go back overseas after five years in Washington, I was anxious to go back to what I considered the real Foreign Service. I wanted to get back into an embassy somewhere, and I was looking for ways to broaden my knowledge and my professional expertise. I wanted to go to a French-speaking country. Although I had studied French at FSI in 1969 when I thought I was going to be assigned to Lubumbashi in Zaire, in the end the Department sent me to Zanzibar, so I didn't use my French. I had been wanting to acquire fluency in French, so I was looking for a French-speaking country. I wanted to go back to Africa, and I also had very much enjoyed my time on Zanzibar as the branch PAO running the USIS library on the island after the Branch PAO had been PNG'd.

I talked with USIA about an out-of-agency assignment, and one day I got a call from a friend of mine in USIA personnel. I had been hoping to go somewhere as aCAO-Cultural Affairs Officer-thinking that was the most I could hope for as a State Department officer, but I got a call one day asking me if I would like to go to Bamako, Mali as PAO.

Q: That's Public Affairs Officer which is the top officer in the public affairs.

CECIL: Right, and I wasn't even the sole officer. The post actually had a second, an assistant, Public Affairs Officer, so I would have another American to supervise and a small local staff. My friend was quite honest. He said, "We can't find anyone in USIA that wants the job." They thought of me, and I jumped at it. I said, "That would be wonderful. It would be a French speaking country, a Muslim country." Having served in East Africa, I would now get to serve West Africa, and it would be a USIA experience. So I jumped at that opportunity. I guess next time we meet we could talk about it.

Q: What was your family situation at the time?

CECIL: Our first child, a son, was born in Nairobi during my Zanzibar assignment, and then during my Beirut assignment our second child, a daughter, was born in Beirut. Then during the five years in Washington my third and last child, a son, was born here in Alexandria. In 1980 we had a ten year old son, a nine year old daughter, and a three year old son. That's what we went to Bamako with. That would probably be a good chunk to devote the next session to. I spent three years in Bamako, Mali.

Q: We'll pick this up in 1980 to '83 when you were off to Bamako as public affairs officer, and we'll talk about the issues there and also the governments they had.

CECIL: When I arrived, which was August 30th of 1980 the country was headed by President Moussa Traore. Traore had gained power through a coup in 1968 when he overthrew the first president, Modibo Keita. The country had a socialist government, I think we could call it, with strong Soviet influence. They were beginning to become a bit disillusioned with the Soviet formula. They saw that the Soviet approach to economic issues wasn't really producing the kind of results that they perhaps had hoped for originally. They were beginning to be more open to other points of view besides the Soviet point of view. That was pretty much the atmosphere during my time. I would say they were cautiously open to American ideas and contacts but certainly had not cast aside the strong ties to the Soviet Union and the strong reliance on the Soviet Union for economic assistance.

Jumping ahead I'll just say Traore himself was overthrown in 1991, so he had another 11 years to go from the time I arrived before he was finally tossed out by General Amadou Toumani Tourï¿½-ATT as he is called-and I can talk a little more about that later.

Q: We'll talk about that.

CECIL: Let me just say, and maybe we said it on the last tape, I arrived as PAO-Public Affairs Officer-an out-of-agency assignment working not for the State Department but for what at that short period of time was called the U.S. International Communication Agency. You recall the name was changed from the traditional U.S. Information Agency and then after a few years they went back to being U.S. Information Agency, but during my time it was called USICA.

I had wanted to serve with USIA ever since I had managed the USIA library in Zanzibar on my second assignment. I had gotten to know something of USIA materials and their usefulness, and I wanted to have the full dose, so to speak. I went out as PAO and as it happened as I approached the end of my two year tour as PAO, the ambassador at the time, Parker Borg, asked me if I would stay a third year to be his DCM. He had a DCM who had family problems and curtailed his tour, so Parker was looking around to find a quick fix, and there I was. Obviously, it was advantageous to be a DCM, so I stayed the third year in that role.

Maybe I've jumped ahead.

Q: About Bamako. What are the boundaries of Bamako, the countries surrounding it and a little about the economy at the time.

CECIL: It's a Muslim former French colony in West Africa. Most of the area of the country is the Sahara. Algeria borders Mali on the north. One of the perennial problems of Mali and also Niger where I served later is the Tuareg people. The Tuaregs are very independent people who historically were known to be bandits and people who charged tolls to the caravans to allow them to pass through their territory. In modern times they've been a difficult minority to control because they've always felt they were not properly represented within the governments of Mali or Niger.

To the west is Senegal. The people of Mali are Malinke people, and they have a lot of cultural ties throughout West Africa. To the south is Ivory Coast-Cote d'Ivoire-and if I looked at the map, I could tell you if there's another one in there. You don't have a map, do you?

Q: Yes, I do!

CECIL: I think the most important thing about Mali was the French colonial experience and the adoption of French as the official language of the country.

Q: The ambassador when you got there was...

CECIL: When I arrived the ambassador was Anne Holloway. She was a political appointee. She had some kind of a professional or personal relationship with Andy Young. I think she had worked on the Hill. In any case, she was important enough in Black democratic circles that she was given the appointment. I arrived on August 30 of 1980. The election, of course, was that November, and Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in his bid for a second term. That was a very interesting insight into a new administration preparing to take over all the authority it earned in the election.

It was a matter of days-literally days-before Anne Holloway received a telegram from Secretary Haig asking for her resignation. He gave her a week to leave the post. She protested that she couldn't do it in a week, so the answer came back, "All right, you can have two weeks." Walter Carrington, I understand, who was our recently arrived ambassador in Dakar, Senegal, another Black-American democratic political appointee, received a similar telegram. He had only been at the post a few months. In the end Anne Holloway left February 27, so I think she managed to get a month or so. It was very quick, and the republican administration was very quick to assert its authority and to start moving Democratic appointees out. We had an interim where the DCM Keith Wauchope was charge until the arrival of a career officer as ambassador, Parker Borg, who came in August or September-I think it was September-of 1981.

I know that Anne Holloway had resisted my appointment as PAO. The deputy PAO told me so when I arrived because she really wanted a career, experienced USIA person, and she was afraid that a State Department political officer would not be as effective at the job. I hope I showed her that I could be just as effective. I think I put her doubts to rest after being there a few months.

I would say that because she was a political appointee she did rely heavily on her staff. I don't want to get too personal about it, but I don't think she ever fully appreciated all the power and influence at her disposal as an ambassador. Her French was not that strong, either, so she was at a disadvantage. The rest of the staff was very capable, so we did our own thing and helped her as we could to play the role she should play.

Q: What would you describe as American interests at the time in Mali?

CECIL: Because of the Soviet influence we as a reflex action wanted to counter that Soviet influence, to weaken it, diminish it, and to do what we could to ensure that Mali was not aligned in the genuine sense-if not pro-American, at least objectively non-aligned.

As I got there and began to size up the situation, I found some other issues that I thought were extremely important. I'll say as PAO I conceived of my work in two categories. One was what I would call "strategic." These were issues of national importance; that is, to the country of Mali and to our own national interests, maybe even of regional importance. I'll give you a couple of examples of what I mean. Then there were the "tactical" issues, as I called them. They were more of the day-to-day things where we were charged with distributing information about current issues or policies and responding to a lot of requests, both local requests from the Malians and requests from Washington for information. You always have this constant stream of short-term, quick reaction requests. Hopefully you don't get so many of those that they prevent you from thinking about the larger context in which you're working.

The best example of a strategic issue that comes to mind was the subject of American studies. After I had been there a few months, I was able to find the books that were used in the Malian school system to teach Malian students about the United States. They were atrocious. They were French publications. I'm sure that in the past they had been used in France. Maybe they still were. The one I remember most clearly was a collection of selections from American writers. These were the most unfavorable, most highly critical commentaries on America that you could possibly find. Some of them were from novels, writers like Richard Wright, and some of them were from commentators and observers. The writers or the editors of this book, and one or two others like it, were almost diabolical in selecting these things. If an American ever criticized the content, they would say, "Oh, these are just American writers we are selecting. We're just quoting your own people, so what's wrong with that?" These were really, really highly critical and presented our society in the worst light, especially the racial issue in the worst light.

Once this came to my attention, I started by surveying the PAO's in other countries in West Africa to see if they had noted the same or, I suggested, that if it hadn't come to their attention that they should inquire into the materials being used in the local school system. I proposed to Washington that USICA fund the drafting of a textbook on American studies which USICA could either print itself or subsidize some publisher to produce as a French language textbook on American studies that could be promoted in French speaking Africa or, for that matter, other French speaking countries.

As far as I know, nothing happened to that idea, at least during my time. Washington's initial reaction was, "Well, it's a really great idea, but we don't have money for that kind of an undertaking." So I did what I could with my own local budget. The first thing I did was to purchase enough American studies books recommended by our office in Paris that was called ARS, African Regional Support. I asked them to help me identify good French language books that presented the United States and its history in a favorable light. I was able to buy enough copies of what they recommended to provide a set to each of the 22 lycees in Mali all over the country, lycees teaching English at that time. I also got a special somewhat larger collection of books for what we called ENSUP, the Ecole Nationale Superieure, which was the teacher-training college of the country. At least we ensured that resource materials that we thought were acceptable were available to the teaching staff in all the lycees around the country.

Q: What was the reaction? Were you up against the French establishment which probably enjoyed sticking it to the Americans or not?

CECIL: I don't know to what extent the French themselves were really encouraging this at the time. The materials were already somewhat old and dated in Mali. It's not atypical that Mali would get hand-me-downs or castoffs, just like the market is full of used clothing. Old textbooks that are no longer in use in France might be donated or sold cheaply to the French West African market. I did not ever blame the French in the early '80s for doing this. Maybe earlier there had perhaps been some French influence in this. Even communist influence in France. I don't know the origin of the books themselves, but they were certainly anti-American in content.

Another way to try and approach the issue and to put pressure on Washington was that I urged every PAO in French-speaking West Africa to include this issue in his 1983 country plan to try to build a ground swell of support for the issue from the field. But again, when I left Mali in the summer of '83, I had not yet seen any real response from Washington. I think it's a good example of how the field often can see issues that seem important in the field, but it's almost as if you're not allowed to discover anything new during your tour because the budget's already been made a year ago or two years ago. If it's not in the budget even though it's a great idea, we can't do anything about it, at least not in the short run.

Another issue that I thought was of strategic importance was the question of English teaching in Mali. Through contacts that I developed I managed to get a list of the 96 Malian teachers of English employed by the ministry of education. The first thing I did was I quadrupled our subscription for the USIA publication called "English Teaching Forum" which was a professional magazine about English teaching methodology with lots of classroom exercises and aids. I started buying enough of those with my budget so every one of the Malian teachers of English could have his or her own personal copy.

We did provide some other books to the Malian school system. There was a wonderful book program. I forget what its official name was, but it was managed in Paris, in which well known and important books in English were identified and then translated into French and printed in paperback editions. Ideally they were for sale through book stores in West Africa at very low prices, but in many cases the commercial channels didn't work because there weren't, frankly, too many people in Mali who could afford to buy a book. Even the educated people had limited salaries.

Through USICA we could obtain copies and make distribution as we saw fit. We were supposed to be careful not to undermine any potential commercial market but the market was so small in Mali that it hardly mattered.

I was able to get, for instance, the French-language translation of Paul Samuelson's Economics. It was the same textbook that I had used to study economics.

Q: I had that in college, too back in the '50s!

CECIL: It was translated into French and another one by Kindleberger called International Economics was translated into French. I got 200 copies of theInternational Economics book and provided them to the ENA, the Ecole Nationale d'Administration, which was the highest level educational facility for training government employees. We did things like when the magazines in our USICA library were replaced with newer ones, things like Time and Newsweek and Ebony and Black Enterprise, I would send those usually either to ENA or to ENSUP to their libraries. Those were in English, but just to try to get information out. And we provided other book collections to those facilities.

Another strategic issue was the question of degree equivalency. This was an issue that affected all of the Francophone countries of West Africa. In Mali if a government employee had the French degree of Doctorat d'Etat, he got an extra allowance, an extra salary payment. If a Malian had an American PhD he didn't get any extra allowance. In 1982 there were about 12 Malians who had American PhD's. Several of them came to me one day to discuss the issue. They were led by a Malian named Soumana Sako. He had a PhD in economics-I forget which university-and he was quite an articulate and forceful personality. He later became prime minister of Mali. We can talk about that later when we get to that period. They laid out their grievance and asked me as the PAO to please go the Ministry of Education and convince them that an American PhD was every bit as hard to get as a French Doctorat d'Etat.

It wasn't quite that simple. I did open up a dialogue with the Ministry of Education and even got Paris to send down to us an expert that we had on the French and American educational system, a fellow named Ray Wanner. He came down and spent several days with us meeting with government officials and with the PhD students themselves trying to explain to them the American university education system.

The problem was that our system of accrediting associations was very difficult for Malians to fathom. They were very skeptical over the absence of national, nationwide government control of education. They said, "How do you ensure the quality of some university here or there?" Attempts to say, "That's what accrediting associations do," didn't seem to carry much weight. During my time we didn't succeed, but just to close that issue and jump ahead quite a few years, I went back to Bamako on a personal visit in December of 1992. I found Soumana Sako and met with him. He had during that period been the prime minister. He said to me that once he became prime minister he was able to do a little more to solve the problem. It took a few years, and I don't know to what extent other PAO's in other Francophone countries took up the issue-whether it was an identical problem there or not. It was certainly what I called a strategic issue that deserved our attention.

I can tell you about the other category is you want-tactical issues-but maybe you have other questions.

Q: I'd like to continue. Did you, while there at the strategic level, was there an attempt by the Soviets to do stuff or by the French, or had the French gotten over America trying to poach on their territory? How was it at that time?

CECIL: This must be a terrible gap in my memory, but I would have to say I don't recall an antagonistic relationship with the French embassy nor with the French cultural center. I can't say that our relationship was close and warm, no. I think we had probably not a whole lot to do with each other, but I do not recall at this time any active French opposition to what we were doing. I think probably on an embassy-to-embassy level the French would certainly not be happy with any inroads we might be making because they would probably see it as a zero sum game in which any influence we gained would be to their detriment. But I don't recall it as being a confrontational-type atmosphere.

Q: Were the Soviets building stadiums or doing other things? Did you find yourself trying to conquer them?

CECIL: I think the answer is pretty much the same. As for the Russians, I think the answer is something similar: no head-to-head confrontations, really. We both went about our own thing. I can give you another example of where you might say I had an opportunity to try to come to grips with ideology or at least atmosphere. There was a local newspaper-only one, L'Essor-edited by a Malian of Vietnamese descent. His mother was Vietnamese; his father was Malian. I think they had met when the Malian had been in Indo-China.

Q: I think they all call them Sinhalese, but there were a lot of French troops there.

Q: I think if I recall, and I haven't thought of his name in 20 years, but I think his name was Gausu Grabo. He was the editor. He was quite a nice person, but the paper, in some ways like those school books, was frequently critical of the United States and sometimes in a very superficial and silly way. The thing that set me off on this little campaign was one day I found an article whose headline said, "Man Kills Wife Who Served Him Pork." It purported to quote a little news item from some American state, I think in the south, that said exactly what the headline said-that some husband was so enraged that his wife had served him pork for dinner that he shot her. And this was a news item!

I said to my staff, "There's a little too much of this kind of stuff." This was probably the silliest. I said, "For the next two months, we're going to do a very careful content analysis of L'Essor, and I want every article that's critical of the United States in any way to be cut out and noted, and we'll make a file. After a couple of months we'll see what we can make of this."

As a matter of fact, there was enough in the file after those couple of months to give me the basis of going to see Gausu Grabo. I said as I turned the pages, "You know, it's hard for us to understand why a non-aligned country, one that purports to be on good terms with both sides of the current international conflict, why you would go out of your way to put these kinds of articles critical of us in your paper? And by the way, I don't find the same kind of articles critical of the Soviet Union. I don't know where you're getting these." The unspoken thing was maybe the Russians were providing them. I don't know to this day where he was getting this kind of stuff.

I think he was actually quite startled when he saw the record day after day as I turned the pages in front of him and the cumulative effect did leave its impression. I would have to say that the number of such items certainly did diminish after that. We had some other successes with the paper. There was a time when they reviewed in a book review column one of the USICA publications that I referred to earlier, the French translations of the American works. I forget which one it was now. That had never happened before.

I think that was an example of how we did in a small way move the Malian media slightly more toward an objective position. I have to add there was no television in Mali at that time, so the paper and the radio-radio especially-were the main vehicles for the distribution of information.

We offered VOA tapes to the Malian radio. Various kinds of features were provided to us by VOA. The Malians rarely used them. I guess that was maybe farther than they were prepared to go at the time, but we made them available on a regular basis. We sent them over regularly to the radio stations, but we weren't very successful in getting them to broadcast them.

One of the things that attracted me about working for USIA was that I saw the role of the PAO basically as a catalyst to help other members of the embassy open doors and to provide material that could serve as a basis for discussions and meetings and dialogues with other local officials and people outside the government as well. The other thing I liked about it was I was political by cone [i.e., Foreign Service specialty], but I liked the fact that the PAO could talk to virtually anyone. I could always find materials that were of interest to someone, and it gave me many, many opportunities to talk to people outside the foreign ministry or other political parties, let's say, or other than officials who were dealing strictly with political issues. I liked to talk to journalists; I liked to talk to artists.. I had an opportunity to meet a few writers and even film makers. Mali had a small number of film makers at the time. I really liked the broad scope of the PAO's mandate and appreciated that opportunity very much.

Another thing I liked about working for USICA at the time was because it was a smaller agency there was perhaps a little more camaraderie. It was a little bit easier to talk to Washington, and the agency was willing to help us when it could. Before I went to Bamako, for instance, I quickly learned that the sister city of Bamako was Rochester, New York. I asked the agency if they would send me up to Rochester and let me meet with the sister city committee, and they did! They paved the way and sent me up for a three day trip: one day up, one day back, and a day there. Very nice of them to do that. During my time in Bamako we were able to get the head of the Rochester sister-city committee to come for a visit.

USICA also sent me to a private language school to refresh my French. I had studied French at FSI in 1969 as we noted way back in this series of interviews, but I'd never had a French speaking assignment. Even though I'd gotten a 3-3 in class, it had been slowly deteriorating on the shelf. Rather than send me back to FSI, USIA sent me to a school up on DuPont Circle called the International Center for Language Studies and gave me a Moroccan instructor who spoke beautiful French. There I was a one-on-one with him for. I think, eight weeks, which got me back up to speed. It was a wonderful benefit of working with the agency at that time.

Once I got to Bamako I tried to make the most of all of these materials, and I did have a wide number of contacts throughout the government and in private society. That goes in the tactical heading of trying to deal with daily issues and seek out targets of opportunity. One little triumph that I was very happy about was the time that I got President Traore to look at a USIA video tape. Because there was no television, video tapes were strong tools to attract interested Malians.

I had gotten to know the Minister of Education, an army colonel named Seiko Li, and I knew that he was very close personally to President Traore. I called him one day and I said, "From time to time I get interesting materials here on video tape. All I need is 24 hours notice from you, and I'll bring my equipment and my tapes to your house and set up a show for anyone you want to invite. You don't have to tell me, I don't care who, but just your friends, your family, anyone you want to invite. I'll be there with 24 hours notice." I told him that I had a very interesting tape about a fly-by, I think of planet Jupiter, it might have been Saturn. It was one of the early space launches, a nice little 30 minute documentary about some of our technological achievements in space. I told him I had that and a couple of other things, but that was the main one. He said yes, he'd like to see that, so he gave me a date.

I came over with my assistant PAO, and we set up the equipment in his living room. I noted when we arrived that at that point there were no cars, no guests. We were a little bit early before the stated hour, and in the end he only had one guest, but it was President Traore! President Traore came and watched the program, was very interested, asked a few questions. What surprised me was when I told Washington that we had shown a couple of USIA tapes to the president, they hardly even responded. There was a case where even if it's small and collegial, it didn't seem to make any impact. I guess they thought, "Well, it's a nice little fluke, but what's the impact on policy?" maybe they were thinking. But it made us feel good that we had that kind of access.

I liked working with the International Visitor program. That was a very valuable resource. One thing I did probably my second year there was I took three of our international visitor grants and awarded them to important Malian businessmen. They were businessmen who were locally successfully, but their business links were all with France. While perhaps they could have paid for their own trip to the United States, they never even thought about looking into American markets. With some help from State and the Department of Commerce we set up a program for them, and we sent three Malian businessmen for... I don't think it was the full 28 days. I think they wouldn't give us that much time, but a couple of weeks as I recall, 14 days or so. They had some meetings. This was another tool we could use to try to orient Malians to the United States and try and expose them to other kinds of thinking besides French and Soviet.

Q Did Mali have any export products that were of value?

CECIL: Mali had gold for one thing, and then an American company came during my time, probably during my third year, and started developing some gold deposits that had previously been explored by the Russians but for some reason had not been developed by them. On the whole it probably was a small deposit, but it was at least an example of how we could draw Mali to the attention of certain American business circles. Otherwise, it's a pretty poor country. I'm not sure what agricultural products they export. Near the border with Ivory Coast they grow cotton. In Niger, for instance, I know they exported cattle to Nigeria mostly. Whether Mali did that now I don't recall. It was not a rich country. It didn't have uranium like Niger. No other important mineral resources that I can recall.

Q: What was happening in the Sahara at the time?

CECIL: Not much. There had been the very serious drought in the mid-70's when there were a lot of people who died, and there was an international assistance program mounted. During our time there was no particular crisis, just the general poverty that characterizes Mali.

I do want to say something about living conditions in Mali for a young American family at that time, to give a little bit of the flavor of the environment. Maybe before we get to that, let me quickly sketch my time there.

In the summer of '82 we did have home leave, came back to the States. I think it was at that time that I went to the DCM's course and returned on August 23, 1982 as DCM. Actually, my last week in Washington I ran into John Countryman in the hallway at the State Department. He had been the deputy country director of NEA/ARP when I was Saudi desk officer. That's between '75 and '77. He asked me if I'd like to be DCM in Muscat when I finished in Bamako. I said, "Yes, that would interest me greatly." Suddenly my next assignment fell quickly into place just before I went back to Bamako, and I was able to tell Parker Borg the day after I arrived, and it was only another day or two before some cable on the issue came. I remember Parker saying, "I'm glad you told me before I got this cable."

The very day after we returned to Mali, Parker sent me on a trip around the country with our defense attachï¿½ who was resident in Abidjan. He had a small C-12 aircraft. He came up to make an orientation visit to Mali. The next day after arriving from the States I flew with the DAO to Kayes in the northwestern part of Mali over near the Senegalese border. After Kayes we over-nighted in Bamako probably, and then we went east to Timbuktu and Gao where we had brief visits. The Soviet Union had built one of the longest runways in Africa at Gao, so they could use it to land large aircraft for refueling on the way to Cuba. Our tiny C-12 was dwarfed by that runway. That was my first opportunity to see much of the country outside of Bamako. My work as PAO had not given me the opportunity to travel much.

Because Mali's infrastructure was so poorly developed, there really weren't tourist facilities in the country and with children the age of mine, we didn't travel much as a family. I was very happy as DCM to have a chance to see the eastern part of the country.

Q: What was Timbuktu like? This is one of the names all of us conjure up as being beyond beyond, sort of.

CECIL: It's a pretty dreary place. It doesn't take much time to see it. There are a couple of mosques which were interesting. For historical researchers there is a wonderful collection of Arabic manuscripts there. At that time they weren't very well maintained. Air conditioning often did not work, so they were subject to bad temperature conditions, and they were probably deteriorating at a serious rate. I think I've read that since that time they have managed to build a nice library to preserve them.

For the casual person there's not a whole lot to see there. I do remember that when you go to Timbuktu-at least at that time-you're supposed to get a stamp on your passport at the local police station, and they charge a small fee for that. I thought this is an interesting example of extortion that persists in Mali at that time. There's no reason to have to get a visa stamp or any kind of a stamp except that it was a source of revenue for local officials. I was only there probably a day or two. Maybe we arrived one day and left the next. I think that's probably what it was. I don't have any meetings of importance to report.

Later, in January of '83 I made a second trip to Gao. The USAID comptroller wanted to go to Gao to check on the finances of a project that AID was supporting near Gao. We drove. That was a very interesting trip. The paved road only went as far as Mopti in those days, then we were on a desert track. There was one set of sand dunes that was exciting to go up and down and over to try to make our way through, but we had an experienced driver and a four wheel drive Land Rover of some sort.

We did arrive in Gao, and I did have a chance on that trip to meet a couple of Malian English teachers, and I was carrying materials for them, and met a couple of local officials. The comptroller ascertained that the Malian in charge of the project was siphoning money off, so it was worthwhile from his point of view to make that trip. That was a small adventure of being able to drive all the way to Gao and back.

There was another small incident of minor historical interest during my time in Bamako. In June of 1981 the aircraft carrying the foreign minister of Algeria crashed at Bamako Airport. The foreign minister was on his way I believe to Sierra Leone to engage in some kind of negotiation between conflicting parties there. I think Algeria was trying to play a role as mediator.

The plane coming from Algiers was intending to land at Bamako to refuel. It came in very late in the day, around 6:00 which is about when the sun goes down most of the year. Day length doesn't vary a whole lot in Bamako. There was some stormy weather, and the plane didn't make it to the runway. It suddenly just lost radio contact. The Algerians started inquiring.

The way we first learned of it, a very interesting demonstration of our communications at the time, was when the DCM Keith Wauchope got a call from the State Department ops center in Washington. The first question was, "What can you tell us about the condition of the Algerian foreign minister?" Keith, as he related this to me, said, "Well, you've reached Bamako, Mali." They said, "Yes! Yes! Exactly! What can you tell us about the condition of the Algerian foreign minister whose plane crashed in Bamako a short while ago?" Keith had to say, "That's the first I've heard about it. I'll have to get back to you."

He started making calls, and he called me. I was PAO at that time, June of '81, and we did quickly learn that, indeed, the airport tower had been in contact with the airplane but then radio contact stopped. The fellow in the tower decided it was the end of the day and his shift was over, so he went home. He didn't set off any alarms. The next morning the manager of the L'Amitiï¿½ Hotel-Bamako's main hotel-was a Swiss manager, and he was also a pilot. He got into his own little aircraft, and he said, "I'll go out and search." The Malians didn't have the capability, it seems. He said within a couple of minutes-literally-of taking off from the airport, he found the wreckage of the aircraft. It was only a mile or two from the end of the runway. It had probably been caught in a downdraft and lost altitude too quickly and crashed in some rugged terrain. It had been there all night.

The Malians got to the aircraft, and they took the survivors into their hospital. The foreign minister had a broken leg. If I recall it was the co-pilot who survived, but the pilot was killed, one or the other. When Keith learned that they had been taken to the local hospital, he had our nurse call the hospital and ask if there was anything they needed. They started giving a list. They just needed everything. They needed saline solution; they needed IV tubes and everything. The nurse said, "We'll bring everything we can from our health unit, and we'll come up."

Keith asked me to come along. We went into the room where we found the foreign minister, either pilot or co-pilot, and one or two other members of the crew. The Malian minister of health was there. I forget his name, but he welcomed Keith, and then he escorted the two of us right into the emergency room to the bed of the foreign minister who was lying there obviously in shock looking straight up at the ceiling. He was such a thin man that my impression was that he had lost his legs, but they were actually under a blanket. The Malian said, "Here are your friends, the Americans! They've come to help!" The reason we were supposed to be his friends was that this was the Algerian minister who had played a role in negotiating the release of the hostages from Tehran during the Carter administration. I forget his name. We were able to witness this sad situation.

Fortunately the Algerians were able to get their own plane in within about 24 hours, and they evacuated their people back to Algiers for treatment. Unfortunately, the poor man later lost his life when his plane was shot down over northern Iraq by the Iraqis. It had strayed off course. He was headed toward Tehran; I think to negotiate the Iraq-Iranian war that was going on at that time. I forget what year, but it would be still sometime early to mid '80s. The plane strayed over northern Iraq, and the Iraqis shot it down, and they all lost their lives. A little vignette in history that we got to see in Bamako.

CECIL: I'd also like to cite an example of the working relationship between the Peace Corp and the State Department. Paris prepared a weekly news bulletin in French, a collection of news articles and an occasional feature article, and sent these bulletins by air to each PAO office in Francophone Africa. Each post could then put its own cover sheet on top with a photo of some local event or activity, to tie it to our individual country. I went to the Peace Corps Director in-country one day and proposed that I take some photographs of Peace Corps Volunteers in their villages doing their work. Most were either promoting hygiene, nutrition, and good health practices, or working in agricultural improvement programs. This would be a good way to get the Peace Corps some recognition for the good work it was doing, I said. The bulletin was distributed to a large list of important Malian government officials. I was totally unprepared for the PC Director's response. The Peace Corps wouldn't want to be on the cover of our weekly news bulletin, he said. It would suggest some connection between the Peace Corps and the embassy. They would never want that. This was the mentality that prevailed inside the Peace Corps back then. They were so cautious about being tainted by appearing to be a part of the U.S. Government that they went to great lengths to maintain a strong buffer between themselves and the rest of the US presence in the country. This attitude had mellowed a bit by the time I reached Niger in the late 90s, but there were still elements of that mentality.

CECIL: Living conditions. Should we talk about that?

Q: Sure.

CECIL: We had already served in Zanzibar which was a 25% hardship post. We had served in Saudi Arabia which I think was probably about 25% also, so we were used to the hardship. There was no doubt that Bamako as a 25% hardship post was by far the most deserving of that extra allowance. It was really a third-world, poverty-stricken country.

We had a very sudden introduction when we started to go out and buy food the first day or two that we were in town. There were shortages of everything. We went to the little supermarket called Mali-Mag. It was the only thing that could even merit the name of grocery store to be patronized by Westerners. The selections were so pitiful. We bought a few things. We found some very sick looking French hot dogs and bought mustard and bread and a dozen eggs which were very, very small. I remember I was so struck by the price, I think $36.00 it was for his tiny little bag of groceries that I actually set it on a stool when we got home so I could take a picture of it to say, "This was our first purchase at the local supermarket, and it cost $36.00." We'd only eat this for a couple of days at best, and not a very balanced diet at that.

The local market was a very basic African market. It was the rainy season, so it was full of mud. My wife quickly ruined her first pair of shoes when she went into the market to try to buy basic fruits and vegetables. Everything was strictly seasonal, and the supplies were very basic. It was a constant problem to keep ourselves well supplied with food. We did have the consumables allowance the Department was providing to some posts. They have expanded that program. Ours hadn't had arrived yet, so that took a while.

Our main concern as parents of young children was the absence of medical facilities. We had an embassy nurse. We did not have an embassy doctor at the time we arrived. Later, I forget what year but before we left, Washington did finally provide a doctor to the post, a regional medical officer.

My third day at post I broke a tooth. After having all my dental work done in Washington, I thought I'd be good for two years at least, but a broken tooth...! I went to the nurse and said, "What do I do? I've broken a tooth." She said, "Oh, that's easy. You go to Bouakï¿½." I said, "Oh. Where's Bouakï¿½?" She said, "Oh, it's down in Ivory Coast. It's about a day and a half drive from here. That's very good timing because the GSO has also just broken a tooth, so the two of you can go together. There's a missionary dentist in Bouakï¿½ with a very nice little modern facility. That's the only place in West Africa where you can get American dental care. They're very insistent, though, that you have an appointment, so you just can't get in the car and go down there. We'll have to ask Abidjan to call Bouakï¿½ and make you an appointment, and then you can go." So that's what happened.

We set out in September of 1980. We drove on very bad Malian roads and reached Ferkessï¿½dougou in northern Ivory Coast, Cote d'Ivoire where there was a Baptist hospital. They were accustomed to providing overnight lodging to American and European travelers, so we spent the night there and then drove on to Bouakï¿½ the next day. It was several hours more to Bouakï¿½. I remember we arrived in time for our 12:00 appointment on September 25. The dentist was able to solve my problem rather quickly. The other fellow had to be medevaced to the States eventually. I don't know what his problem was, but it was beyond the capability of the missionary dentist. The dentist was a Dr. Charles Deevers from Mississippi. He was bringing God's word and good dental care to the people of central Ivory Coast.

The wonderful thing about his clinic was he had seven Ivorian assistants, each from a different tribe so that each of them could speak the local language to the patients of their tribe. This American dentist was educating them, giving them on-the-job training to improve the dental care in central Ivory Coast. After our appointments we then went to the Bouakï¿½ market where we loaded up with as many consumables as the Land Rover would carry. I know we had a 110 lb. bag of rice, 110 lb. bag of sugar, a 55 lb. bag of potatoes because these were the kind of staples that were very scarce if at all available in Bamako. It was really amazing.

Then we drove back to spend another night at Ferkessï¿½dougou, the missionaries there, and then on back to Bamako the fourth day. So it took four days to get dental care. That was actually faster than if you did it by air. I broke another tooth amazingly a couple of months later. It was the only time in my life I've ever broken any teeth; I don't know what happened. That time there was also another member. A member of the embassy's Budget and Fiscal office had a dental problem so again there were two of us who needed to go. Because the drive was boring, I would say, and the roads were bad, we decided to fly.

When you fly it takes five days instead of four. That's because we could only go down on Air Mali on a Saturday, a Russian turbo prop aircraft flown by Cuban pilots, and they made one run a week to Bouakï¿½. We went down on Saturday but the first opportunity to return was the following Wednesday on an Air Ivoire flight. That's another story I can tell you about, air travel in West Africa, if we have time for that.

In any case, on this occasion-it was November-my friend and I went down to Abidjan by train after we had gotten our dental care. I wanted to consult with the USICA office in Abidjan. It was before Thanksgiving, so we brought a frozen turkey at the embassy commissary in Abidjan and some other things. I bought chocolate chips and brownie mix and things like that that were totally not available in Mali. We carried those back to Bamako when we finally flew back. That wasn't without some problems. Our plane had a mechanical problem, and we spent 10 hours waiting in the airport with the turkey thawing all that time, but we did manage to get home and have a turkey for Thanksgiving.

That same month, November of 1980, I had my first and only encounter with amoebic dysentery which we got at the Marine ball which was at the finest hotel at Bamako, the L'Amitiï¿½. The finest...there wasn't much competition. I got amoebic dysentery and had to go through the course of treatment. It was okay, but it's not something I'd like to do again. It's another example of the health hazards of Bamako.

On another occasion, my youngest son who was three or four at the time, was excited to be going over to the DCM's house to play croquet, I think it was. He started running toward the front door. He tripped on a rug and fell head first into the glass door that was our front door and had a very jagged, messy cut on his forehead. Our only recourse was to call the nurse. We met her at the health unit, and she cleaned it. She didn't stitch it because she thought maybe it didn't require stitches. She taped it as close together as she could. My little boy, scared by the blood, was asking his mother, "Am I going to die?" There was a lot of blood. Anyway, she patched him up but to this day he has a scar there. Just another example of another issue our family had to face.

I think a benefit of our time in Mali was that my kids-who as I noted were nine, eight, and three when we arrived and, therefore, twelve, eleven and six when we left-got a real appreciation for what poverty is. They saw it all around them. The first Christmas there we threw our Christmas wrapping paper away in the garbage and later that day our kids discovered that our gate guard was very carefully removing each piece of wrapping paper from the garbage, spreading it out on the ground and trying to remove as many wrinkles as he could. He was going to take it home or take it to the market and try and sell it.

Our kids saw leprosy for the first and probably only time in our career. When we would go to the supermarket, there was a little gauntlet of Malian ladies who were always there near the door with little plastic bowls. Most of them were missing their fingers. They would hold up the plastic bowls and expect you to put coins in, which we did, of course. Our kids began to accept this as a daily occurrence. You walked past the lepers and gave them a coin.

Years later in Virginia, my youngest son came home from school one day. I think he was probably in fourth or fifth grade. I remember at dinner he said to us, "Dad, no one in my class has ever seen a leper. My teacher hasn't ever even seen a leper." To me that just showed me that Foreign Service kids really have experiences and opportunities to learn things that the average American child doesn't. I think that certainly was an eye-opener to them about what the rest of the world is like.

As we neared the end of our time there, I received my orders for Muscat. We had brought a Peugeot 504, used, on the local market, from another American. We decided to take that car with us to Muscat. We contacted our embassy in Lomï¿½, and they said yes, indeed, if we wanted to get it there they would be happy to arrange the shipment to Muscat. We decided to use that as an opportunity to drive, to go through Burkina Faso and down through Togo to Lomï¿½, to make an adventure out of it. In May of 1983 we did that.

I remember crossing the border into Burkina Faso. We did all the formalities and got in the car and started driving away. Almost instantaneously it seemed a Guinea hen ran across the road in front of us and I hit it straight on. No way I could miss it. As soon as I hit it the red warning light on the dashboard came on. My wife got the car manual out of the glove compartment. She looked it up and it said, "If this light comes on, go immediately to your nearest Peugeot dealer for service." Here we are! I was very careful the rest of the way into Bobo-Dioulasso where we spent the night. The brakes seemed to work okay; it was the brake light that came on. I went to a local mechanic that I found on the street. He took the wheels off and took his air hose and blew a lot of dirt and dust away. He said, "I don't see anything wrong. The hydraulic lines are solid, there are no leaks." When he put the wheels back on after cleaning out all the dust and dirt, the light went off, we proceeded on our way. Just another little incident that you run into.

We spent a couple of days in Lomï¿½. My good friend Charlie Twining at that time was chargï¿½ in Cotonou, Benin, so we arranged to go over and visit him and see something of Benin. He had arranged for us to pick up visas at the border check point, and when we arrived there they were ready, and there was no problem. It was very quick to get through the border check point. As we drove away from the check point out on to the highway, there was a huge banner over the road in front of us. It said, "Mort aux Traitres", "Death to Traitors" in other words. It was only in French. It's sort of like, "Welcome to Virginia." "Death to traitors" if you enter Benin. My wife said to me, "Are you sure we really want to make this trip?" but we did. We carried on, and we had an interesting day or two in Cotonou. Cotonou had not long before been the object of a little invasion of Portuguese mercenaries, and there may have been some South Africans in the group, too. You could still see bullet holes in some of the ministries where there had been some fighting, so the Beninois were very sensitive. The government was a rigidly leftist government at that time, not very popular, so they felt insecure.

We flew back to Bamako after leaving the car with the embassy. We actually departed Bamako on the 10th of June 1983. I had exchanged telegrams with the DCM in Muscat who's actually the same fellow I had succeeded on the Saudi desk some years earlier, and he explained to me why I needed to be there for the 4th of July National Day reception. It would be so useful for to meet all of his friends and contacts. This meant leaving Bamako a couple of months earlier than scheduled, but Parker Borg said, "Okay, of course, we can get through the summer. Muscat needs you, so by all means go ahead."

We had a short curtailed week or so vacation in Europe. I, in fact, had asked Washington to bring me back to Washington for consultation. I knew that John Countryman, the ambassador, was going to go on home leave for six weeks, one week after I arrived. I had been out of the Arab world for eight years and I said, "There are a lot of important issues, especially political-military issues in the Persian Gulf, and it would be good for me to have a week's consultation in Washington before suddenly becoming chargï¿½ after a few days in the country."

The reply was classic Washington. They said, "We don't really have the travel funds available right now. You should proceed directly to Muscat, and we'll see if we can do this later." I have to add I even had proposed to Washington that only I come to Washington. I wasn't asking that they fly my family. I said, "My wife and children will stay in Europe while I come to Washington for five days consultation." Washington said, "No, we don't have the money for that." I thought it was a very poor way to run a railroad: send the guy to become chargï¿½ when he had been out of the area for so many years. That's Washington.

When we arrived in Muscat on the second of July, I found that the DCM had gone and there was no National Day reception! They did a national day in February in the Gulf because the temperatures in July just aren't appropriate for a large outdoor reception. Also, as many local people and diplomats who can, leave the country for the summer months, so a large segment of our target audience is not around in July

Q: when I was in Dhahran we did it on Washington's birthday.

CECIL: That's exactly what we did in Kuwait, and I felt that my friend had betrayed me, certainly misled me. He wasn't even there. He got me there on schedule, and I guess that was his main concern at the time. I still remember that to this day, and I think he was unfair with us.

That pretty much covers the things I remember. I don't know if there are points that you'd like me to retrieve from the depths, or if that's enough.

Q: Did events in South Africa play any role? It was pretty far away.

CECIL: I'd have to plead failing memory, I guess. I don't' recall it as being a major issue. I can't remember.

Q: That's probably the answer!

CECIL: I do remember another little vignette that maybe is worth putting on the record, a little historical vignette. I mentioned Soumana Sako, the leader of the group with the American PhD. Soumana Sako sometime in maybe the very late '80s or possibly 1990-91, became Minister of Finance. He was a very straight-laced person, very much against corruption, and as Minister of Finance he took a tough line with the other members of the cabinet. He made his opposition known to any attempts by the other ministries to pad their budgets or use their position in any way for their own betterment. This made him unpopular with President Traore and other members of Traore's circle.

We went back to see Soumana in December of '92. The reason for that is I was in Abidjan then as DCM. My kids came to Abidjan for Christmas, and we all decided we would like to drive up to Bamako and see our old house and see what Bamako was like years later, nine years after we left. The ambassador and DCM managed to find Soumana Sako for me, and I went to see him.

He told me that one time after an especially acrimonious cabinet meeting he had been walking in some parking lot somewhere on the way to his car. I think, perhaps, there was some kind of a public function that followed the cabinet meeting. A man came up to him in a civilian "boubou" we'll call it. A man came up to him that he didn't know and said, "I just want you to know that many of us are with you." That's all he said. Then the man went away. Soumana Sako turned to someone he was walking with and said, "Who is that?" The friend said,. "That's Colonel Amadou Toumani Tourï¿½. He's a very important military officer." It was Tourï¿½ who carried out the coup some short time later against Traore.

Tourï¿½ then appointed-or his group appointed-Sako as prime minister. He served as prime minister from the ninth of April 1991 until the ninth of June 1992. Tourï¿½, of course, presided over what we would call a transitional presidency, and he arranged for free and fair elections. He was not interested in using the coup to place himself in power. Because he presided over a peaceful transition of power to civilian leadership, some years later he did run for the presidency, was elected, and now has been re-elected. I think he is still in office in his second term.

I found that parking lot conversation very interesting because it showed that at that time there was already a group of dissatisfied military talking about overthrowing Moussa Traore, and they actually did do it somewhat later.

Q: We'll stop at this point, and we'll pick this up in 1983 when you had arrived in Muscat. We haven't talked about Muscat yet, and we'll start there.

Oman

CECIL: Right.

Q: today is the fifth of March 2008. We're talking about 1983 till when you were in Muscat?

CECIL: Eighty-six.

Q: Chuck, let's start. In 1983 you're off to Muscat. What was your job there, and then describe what the situation was there.

CECIL: I went to Muscat as deputy chief of mission with Ambassador John Countryman. John Countryman was an Arabist, a career officer, and we had worked together earlier when he was deputy country director for Arabian peninsula affairs, and I was the desk officer for Saudi Arabia at the time back in the '75 to '77 period.

I was very happy to go to Muscat not only because the job was an important job but the country was an important one. Because of my earlier service in Zanzibar I was especially interested in the historical links between the Arabian peninsula and East Africa. Sultan Qaboos had been in power 13 years when I arrived in '83. He had overthrown his father in 1970 with the help of the British. His father was not a modern man, and the country was facing a communist supported civil war in the south in a region called Dhofar which was of grave concern to the British. With British help, and I believe they also had help from Jordan and Iran, the sultan managed to put down that rebellion. By then-'83-the country was a modern country with a wonderful infrastructure.

Q: I wonder if you could talk a bit for background of how Qaboos ousted his father but also how this Marxist rebellion was put down with the help of outsiders.

CECIL: I wouldn't want to try to take the place of writers and historians who have studied that and written very carefully in detail about it. It all happened before I arrived. Let me just say that Sultan Qaboos was sent to England by his father to Sandhurst, a traditional military academy, and that was probably his father's fatal mistake. That gave his only son a modern British-inspired military education. After finishing at Sandhurst Sultan Qaboos went on to Germany as a member of a British military unit in Germany at that time. That would have been sometime in the late '60s.

Q: The British army of the Rhine.

CECIL: Then Qaboos returned to Oman to Salalah because his father spent most of his time in Salalah. Qaboos's mother was a Dhofari from southern Oman. The father kept his son under virtual house arrest in the palace. The government of South Yemen-the People's Democratic Republic-was a communist government with strong support from the Soviet Union and perhaps from the Chinese. I've forgotten now the extent of the Chinese involvement. That communist government instigated a rebellion in the Dhofar Province, the southern province, of Oman.

Q: It was [inaudible].

CECIL: Right. The war was a difficult one, not going well. Oman itself was virtually closed to the outside world by the father, Said Taimour. He wanted to keep all modern influences out. He did, in fact, in the '60s allow the Dutch oil company, Shell, to come in and start exploring. They quickly found oil, so there was an anomaly there. It was a little enclave where the oil prospectors and developers lived and worked. Aside from that, it was extremely difficult to get into the country.

Money was not being used to support the development of the people. You'll find incredible statistics such as in 1970 the number of miles of paved road in Oman was probably less than 10, and that was in the capital city of Muscat. There was I think one school. The British were quite concerned that the rebellion might gain more support from the people. The British role has always been pretty quiet. You don't want to overstate what their role was, but certainly they condoned what was basically a palace revolution in which the father was basically told to go. I think he was actually wounded by a gunshot if I recall one account that I read. I don't think that anyone was killed in the palace action. They may have been but certainly it was a very minor thing. The father was then sent off to London where he spent the rest of his life in one of the big hotels in London.

Qaboos took over the leadership in 1970. He was an educated, modern man. Perhaps the best educated of all the rulers on the Arabian peninsula certainly back then and probably still so now. I'm mentally going down the list, and I'm not quite sure of what the education level is of some of the newer leaders. In any case he was a very modern man, and he started to open up the country.

When I arrived in '83, though, it was still a very interesting combination of British support and Omani attempts to manage their own country. When I arrived British officers commanded all branches of the Omani armed forces, and the senior commander over the entire military establishment was a General Timothy Creasey, a British general. The sultan relied very heavily on Britain for support and for expertise to help run and manage his country. He loved and admired anything British and, in fact, in 1985 when it was time to celebrate the 15th anniversary of his coming to power, the sultan invited the London Philharmonic Orchestra to come to Muscat to play as part of the celebration. He was criticized for that by the Omanis. They thought this was a needless expense, an extravagance. Some people didn't like that use of money.

While I was there at some point during the '83,- '86 period, the sultan did finally appoint an Omani as army commander, and an Omani became the deputy commander of the air force. He would have become commander but he unfortunately died in an airplane crash in the far north on the Musandam Peninsula when the plane he was piloting ran into a mountain at the end of a runway. That set back the effort to put Omanis in charge of the air force. I'm sure by now all the military forces are commanded by Omanis. That was, after all, more than 20 years ago.

At the top level the United States and the United Kingdom were in close agreement with our goals in that area, but we had what we call "working level" difficulties. Oman was really, I must say, almost the last outpost of the British empire. It's as if a high tide washed up all the colonial ex-pats who had no home to go to or any other profession other than being colonial civil servants. They all settled in Oman for the last hurrah, and they jealously guarded their positions and their influence. They saw our presence there as part of a zero sum game and any increase in American influence the British saw as being at their expense.

On the working level our relations with the British were cordial but not particularly friendly. I remember once the second econ-commercial officer that came during my time, a lady named Diane Markowitz, told me once when I asked her, "How are you being treated by the people you have to deal with here?" She was the first woman economic-commercial officer on the embassy staff. She told me her problems were much greater with the British that she had to deal with than the Omanis. The Omanis treated her like an educated professional, but the British business managers were very chauvinistic, very sexist oriented in the way they treated her. That might be typical of the attitude that was very common there.

The major issue during my three year period which had preceded my arrival was the question of access to facilities for our military forces. Talks had originated in the Carter administration around 1979 or 1980, and we had negotiated an access to facilities agreement with Oman. As part of that agreement we were constructing very large facilities in Oman to pre-position military equipment. We needed someplace to store that quantity of vehicles and armament and everything you can think of that we would need if we ever had to engage in military action in the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was present in Oman overseeing the construction projects to allow us to pre-position the equipment.

They reached the peak in their activity around 1984. I remember that their target date for leaving was September '86. I'm not sure that the corps of engineers actually met that departure date or not, but it was around that time they probably did leave. We renegotiated that access to facilities agreement during my time. We renewed it for another five years.

Q: With all this equipment we must have had to have a certain amount of residual American presence there to keep an eye on it and maintain it so things didn't rust and all that when there.

CECIL: Very small. Very modest. Let me say a word about what constituted the U.S. presence at that time. The embassy itself was located in old Muscat-the old capital. We were in an old building rented from an important Omani family called the Zawawi family, and the building was called The Bayt Zawawi. It was an old style Omani residence three stories tall, very traditional in its architecture. It was adjacent to the British embassy which was also adjacent to the Sultan's Palace. There on the waterline of Old Muscat you had the sultan's palace, the British embassy, and the American embassy. A very cozy little arrangement.

I can't remember exactly how many Foreign Service Officers we had, but it was small: the ambassador, myself, a political officer, two consuls, an economic-commercial officer, one admin officer, a GSO, a Budget and Fiscal Officer. That's about it for the State Department side. I believe a junior economic-commercial officer came for the first time near the end of my time there. The Federal Aviation Agency had a representative at Seeb airport to advise Omani aviation authorities on various matters.

We had a defense attachï¿½ and an assistant defense attachï¿½ plus an office called the Office of Military Cooperation headed by an army major. Then we had the corps of engineers. I don't remember how many people were in the corps of engineers office. Not excessively large, probably less than 10. We had a small office called the U.S.-Omani Joint Commission which was a USAID staff office. It had about three or four American officers. The joint commission was mutually funded by the U.S. and the government of Oman. They were nearing the end of their work. I know they were involved in a fisheries project and in some kind of education project. I can't remember the details anymore. We had a USIS office with a PAO.

Again, their geographic location and their being on a peninsula just across the water from Iran. They were always very careful to maintain a proper relationship with Iran.

We had an interesting example of the Omani attitude. In 1984 on the 14th anniversary of Sultan Qaboos's ascension to power, the sultan invited General Kingston who at that time was the commander of CENTCOM to come as his guest and attend the national day celebration.

Q: CENTCOM being the American Military Organization that had responsibility for that area.

CECIL: Right. You're like Jim Blair who always explains to the audience what the acronym stands for! The Central Command. That's exactly it: He was commander of our military forces that were responsible for anything we might have to do in that part of the world. You could say the pre-positioning facilities were really being built to serve his needs. A four star general he was. General Kingston came. He had a seat on the reviewing stand with some other hundred guests, and the sultan would take them to a number of special ceremonials, but the TV cameras never picked up the American general when the ceremonies were being broadcast, nor were any photos in the press or any articles written that ever mentioned his presence. So he was there and he wasn't there. They treated him as the guest they wanted him to be, but they certainly didn't want any public attention focused on the close working relationship that we were developing. We thought it was a very nice gesture that the sultan invited him, but we understood why they were careful to avoid being criticized by their neighbors for being too close to us.Interestingly enough, I remember from a letter I wrote back to a family member, the day after General Kingston left we had a four star admiral come in-Admiral Foley-who was commander of our Pacific fleet, CINCPAC. He had been to Oman five years earlier in some other capacity, and now he was coming in for an update and to have a look around just to see what was going on. He was on his way back to Hawaii but made a stop there. He was warmly received by the Omani government.

A couple of weeks after that we had Admiral Fallon who was the commander of our Mid-East forces, three ships in those days. He came with his ship, The LaSalle, spent three days in Muscat on a port visit. Throughout the three years this was maybe not typical. This was a bit excessive, but we did get constant periodic visits by military personnel. The Chief of Naval Operations came. Lots of people.

Q: As you were looking at it, we're talking about '83 to '86, what was the feeling about the Gulf and what might happen? As I recall the Iran-Iraq war was going full blast, wasn't it, at that time?

CECIL: At full blast? I'm not sure, but probably it was.

Q: It pretty much stopped around '89, I think.. We had the flagging of Kuwaiti ships at the time. What were our military preparations in your mind and the minds of others? What were we pre-positioning for or against?

CECIL: I'm sure the Pentagon always has its war plans, its theater plans and obviously because of the importance of oil and free access to the Persian Gulf, we had to take prudent measures to be ready for whatever the challenge might present. I don't think at that point we were focused on any one or single country simply because of the need to ensure that oil can keep flowing through the Straits of Hormuz. Because of our concern for the stability of the traditional Arab leaders, certainly the Saudis and the sultan himself, the Kuwaitis, I think it was part of a general prudent series of measures taken to ensure that we would have the ability to respond to whatever threat might present itself. The regime in Iran was hostile to us at the time and still is, so we had to bear that in mind. Oman was a welcoming country because it tended to conduct its affairs very discreetly, it seemed to be able to reconcile its desire to be on good terms with us with its own need to preserve good close relations with its Arab and Iranian neighbors.

Q: Let's talk about the Omani-Iranian relationship during this period of time. So many places like Bahrain and all had a significant Iranian immigrant population, and they were restive or could be. What was the situation in Oman at the time?

CECIL: While there was no resident Iranian population, there was a historical rift. Iran had, I think we could say, colonized the northern part of Oman centuries earlier for some period of time. There was a kind of wariness. Hostility wouldn't be the right word, but a sense of caution about the Iranian relationship and the obvious size, population, and wealth of Iran would always make it a potential threat.

In the modern era Iran had not threatened Oman in any way similar, for instance, to the way it threatened the United Arab Emirates when Iran occupied the little islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs in the Persian Gulf, nor did Oman have anything like the Shia population that Bahrain had, where Iranians had historical claims on Bahrain. There was nothing as poignant as that. Oman was always very careful to treat Iran with all the care and respect that such a powerful neighbor would have.

I can recall one incident involving an Iranian in my time. An Iranian pilot flew a military aircraft to Oman and asked for asylum. The foreign minister called me in. I was chargï¿½ at the time. I don't remember where my ambassador was. The minister called me in and asked me if the United States would please take this Iranian off their hands. I said no. I knew that we would not be able to do that. I said, "First of all, the normal channel for such requests is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. If this fellow is requesting political asylum, he has to go to the UNHCR." I told the foreign minister-it was Yusuf Al-Alawi Abdullah, still today the foreign minister. They have wonderful stability in Omani government. I said to Yusuf Al-Alawi, "It's not only in our interest that the UNHCR handle this, but it's also in your interest because neither of us wants it to become known that if you're an Iranian seeking political asylum, all you have to do is get to Oman and they'll turn you over to the United States. You would begin to have lots of these people, and neither you nor us want that."

I remember he was not happy with that answer. In fact, the chief of station came to me and said, "You've irritated the foreign minister, and he's actually thinking in terms of sending you home." PNGing me, in other words. It didn't happen, I'm glad to say, but obviously the minister did not like to be turned down. Perhaps it is an example of how sensitive the issues involving Iran might be.

Q: Do you know what happened to the pilot?

CECIL: No, I don't. I presume he did go to the UNHCR, but I don't know. There's some other reasons that recommended Oman as a good site for pre-positioning military supplies, and those probably should be noted. You may ask yourself why is Oman different from the other countries on the Arabian peninsula. In fact, now in this century, other countries have agreed to welcome us as well. We have personnel and equipment in the UAE and in Qatar. Things have changed. In the mid '80s, this was before the first Iraq war and certainly before the second. It was a different atmosphere back then.

If you looked at Oman in that time, the first thing you realize is that the general security situation was a very good one. There was no local population that would create an internal problem. I mentioned the case of Bahrain. There's no restive Shia community in Oman. There's a tiny community called the Luwati community that came originally from India. They are Shia but they are not numerous and not a political problem. They tend to be merchants and keep a low profile.

There are no Palestinian residents in Oman, so you don't have the problem that you have in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia for instance, where you always have to wonder about the loyalty of Palestinians around the oil facilities. Kuwait had a large Palestinian population in that time. Oman didn't have these domestic minorities, foreign populations that could cause a problem. They had good local security service, quite well informed, able to keep track of developments in their own country.

On the other hand, you might have to say that their borders were somewhat porous in the sense that there's nothing near along the desert border, the Rub al-Khali. A real determined person could probably come overland from the UAE or from Saudi Arabia but more likely from the UAE and get into Oman without permission. That was an issue. The very fact that U.S.-Omani relations were so good did tend to attract the attention of people who opposed our presence and our interests in the area. I can't say that it was without concern, but it was on the whole a pretty secure place.

You might ask, "What else makes Oman different?" First of all, I would say that historically it has been largely isolated or insulated, insulated from the Arabian Peninsula interior. The Nejd, the area around Riyadh, has a reputation for being a very conservative Muslim area. It wasn't easy to travel from central Arabia to Oman.

Omani attention has always been outward looking. They were sea merchants, they had their ties with East Africa, they had their ties with India an area now Baluchistan in Pakistan. They were very much oriented toward the sea. Sinbad the Sailor in Arabian literature was an Omani. In the more modern era, their gaze was oriented toward London because of the British influence. The British had been very important in that area from the 19th Century onward.

This rebellion we mentioned in Dhofar had nothing to do with the common traditional Middle East problems, nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli problem. It was strictly a Marxist-supported rebellion, and that made Oman a factor in the Cold War. That's why the United States and Britain and the western countries were so concerned that the Omanis and the British put down this rebellion. It was seem as another attempt by the communist world to expand its influence and control.

During my three years there were a couple of other things that were important evidence of our close relationship. We had two visits by Vice President Bush during my three year period. He came first in May of 1984, and he came again in 1986. I forget which month that was, but I left probably in July, so it was before July. Those were interesting experiences dealing with the advance team and having some contact with the Vice President himself and with Mrs. Bush. The lasting impression that I have and I think the embassy staff have was how pleasant they were to deal with. They were not demanding; they were not unreasonable. They were very nice people.

One point to demonstrate that is that we were told by the advance team that the Vice President insists that in every program, no matter how busy it is, there has to be at least one full hour for the Vice President and his wife to meet the embassy staff. In our cases there was a reception at the ambassador's residence where the Bushes circulated as much as they could, available for pictures with family. Kids were welcome. I have some photos given to me: Vice President Bush shaking hands with my kids and things like that. Every member of the embassy who had kids has those kinds of photos.

Some of the high level visits can be very difficult because the advance team is unrealistic in what they ask for. Usually I found in my career that advance teams reflect the personality of the principal. If the principal is demanding, then the advance team will convey that personality. This was a wonderful example of perfectly pleasant people to deal with. He came twice. I can't say anything tangible resulted, but the visits were the visible symbols of a close working relationship. Bush had good meetings with Sultan Qaboos on both occasions. On the second visit he went to the city of Salalah, the southern major city which Qaboos always regards as his home. That added a new wrinkle to make the visit more interesting.

We had another interesting visit, again of symbolic importance but not a lot of substance to it. Former President Ford came as the head of a delegation for the fifteenth national day, the anniversary of Sultan Qaboos's accession, in November of 1985. Mrs. Ford came with him and a group of a dozen other prominent Americans in the Republican party. These were not office holders but mostly big contributors, and they were rewarded by being invited to come with the former president as part of our delegation for the National Day ceremony. That's an example of how the party in power can repay favors and keep good relations with its financial and political supporters.

During my time we should note a trend that was underway in Oman. That was the gradual tightening up. Despite all of this good will, the gradual tightening up on restrictions on diplomatic activities, not just ours but across the board. It did this through early 1984. I don't think it was so much in evidence when I arrived in the summer of '83, but in '84 one of the new requirements was to require advance approval for travel. In September or October of '83 the political officer and I had driven from Muscat to Salalah, an all-day drive. We drove down and back even though it's barren desert country, nevertheless, I like to see the terrain. Salalah itself was quite interesting.In '84 the requirement to get advance approval for such travel was instituted.

I remember that our economic officer at the time, Robert Dry, was denied permission to go to Salalah with our agricultural attachï¿½ who was residing somewhere else on the peninsula. I don't remember where he was from, but he was coming on a visit to explore possibilities for sales of U.S. agricultural products. Rob Dry had asked to take him to Salalah to talk with merchants down there. They were denied permission to make that trip on the grounds that Salalah was a military area. That's one example.

The other thing that the Omanis instituted was the requirement that all appointments with government officials be made in advance in writing through the foreign ministry by diplomatic notes, and the diplomatic notes had to be in Arabic. This was a real pain, a real nuisance, and it really did hinder-slow down-our ability to meet and talk with government officials. Some Omanis would give us appointments if we called without waiting for the foreign ministry to do the preliminary contact, but many would not. Many were very careful about procedures. This slowed things down.

We had a serious problem over the handling of diplomatic pouches. The Omanis had a form you had to fill out in advance to clear a diplomatic pouch in the airport. On that form, one of the boxes you had to fill in was the weight of the pouch. The Omanis claimed they were tightening up on pouches because, they said, they were afraid that countries like Iraq might be smuggling weapons in to their embassies through the diplomatic pouch, so this was their rationale.

Our pouches were put together in Bahrain. They were flown out from Washington and from Frankfurt, and Bahrain was a central distribution point. Then a courier, a little charter airplane, would fly down the Gulf stopping at the various places, Doha then Abu Dhabi, and then on to Muscat. The pouch was literally only put together at best the night before the flight, sometimes the morning of the flight, so it was almost impossible for us to know the weight of that pouch before it arrived. We had a difficult and contentious period there where the Omanis showed very little flexibility. Eventually over time we got them to accept the form with that box blank, to be filled in at the airport at the time of arrival. It was a serious issue, and the Omanis were not very flexible.

Q: Not only the pouch business, but the appointment business: Was this a bureaucratic tussle between powers within the government or was there cause for this? I imagine you got together with other diplomats and talked about all this.

CECIL: The Omanis justified it on security grounds. I think it reflected their desire to know everything or as much as possible about what foreign representatives were doing in their country. We were obviously a target, but because it did apply to all the diplomatic corps, I can't say it was solely because they thought we were too active. We certainly were active. We saw our job as getting to know as many Omanis as we could and to understand the society as best we could. That meant meeting as many different types of people in government and out of government, and in the business sector whenever possible. I think certain Omanis at the top of their security service and perhaps in the foreign ministry wanted to be very much in control. They didn't like the idea of foreigners freelancing.

Another point that I should mention is entry into the country was still not easy. Visas were difficult to get although the country had modernized by 1983 outwardly. Superficially they had a wonderful road system, it had wonderful quality architecture for government offices; every year wonderful new ministries were opening. Communications were improving. Nevertheless, the Omanis were still careful whom they let into their country. To get a visa you had to have a sponsor inside Oman. You could only get a single entry visa. If you wanted to come as a visitor-a tourist-the only way you could do that was to be part of an organized tour group under the umbrella of a travel agency. There was none of this Stu Kennedy or Chuck Cecil deciding they wanted to go see Oman. They controlled entry still very carefully, fairly rigidly. Today you can get a visa on arrival at the airport. It has totally changed.

Another example, perhaps, of their desire for maintaining control of our activities is they closed out the Peace Corps presence in early 1983. I'm not sure when we got started, the early '70s, but I'm not sure which year. I think we were there about 10 years. I, in fact, had arrived on July second or third, 1983 expecting that the Peace Corps was still there. My predecessor hadn't even told me. They had been phased out, and I was told that it was the Foreign Minister's feeling that they were no longer needed in Oman. Why? Perhaps it was partly appearances. Oman didn't want to seem to be a poor third-world country that needed the Peace Corps, but I also think an element of that was that the senior Omanis didn't like the idea that these Americans were living in these small towns and going to various parts of the country out of senior officials' view. Who knows what they might me learning and what they might be saying? I think that was the primary reason for phasing them out.

Another example of the desire to control activity was the question of our building a new embassy building, a chancery. The old traditional building that we occupied in downtown Muscat was unable to house all of us. The Omanis, as evidence of their wish to control, designated an area of land that they wanted to turn into a diplomatic compound. They wanted all embassies to be constructed in this new area along the sea about five to ten miles from Muscat, quite close to where we lived in a residential area.We began talking to Washington about designing and building an embassy and acquiring the land. FBO-Foreign Buildings Operations-came out with a design, and it was a somewhat traditional U.S. embassy type of design, with a very business-like appearance. The Omanis said, "All construction in Oman must be reflect the Islamic character of the nation." They had a very strong architectural control committee in the capital area, and any new building had to be approved by the architectural control committee before it would be build. FBO said, "We're not a Muslim country. We don't do Islamic architecture." The Omanis very politely and very calmly said, "That's fine. When you really want to move ahead with this, you come back with your new design and talk with us again." There was a period of a stand-off where Washington thought they didn't really mean it, and the Omanis meant it absolutely. In the end FBO came up with a so-called Islamic design. It's got some arches, some features. It blends in nicely with the local environment.

It also probably goes back to the Sultan Qaboos and his education and his refinement. He's very concerned about appearances. He wanted his country to look nice, and he wanted it to reflect his culture. A rule was that any Omani government employee must wear traditional Omani dress to the office. No western dress was allowed. He also wanted his country clean. You could immediately tell the difference when you crossed the border from Oman into the United Arab Emirates. We drove a couple of times along that road over to Abu Dhabi. Out in the countryside away from any town, you would find usually Bangladeshis or Pakistanis all along the highway with flat plastic garbage bags and little spiked sticks picking up any piece of trash that was found. When the bag was full they would tie it up and leave it to the side of the road. Later a little pickup truck would come along picking up all the garbage bags. As soon as you crossed the border into the UAE it was absolutely filthy. The roadsides were littered with plastic trash that would never decompose. It was evidence of the sultan's insistence that his country would make a good impression on the world.

There was also a very famous rule that you could be fined if your car was dirty. The Omani police didn't really like to enforce that rule because the fine was a very heavy fine, something like 50 rials (about $150), if you were caught with an unwashed car. I think the only time it was ever really enforced was at ceremonial times, national day celebrations when a lot of foreigners would be coming in as invited guests. It was another example of how the sultan was concerned about his country's appearance.

Q: Let's talk about the government of Oman. Was he bringing in democracy? What about ordinary citizens running? What was happening?

CECIL: If I can give a plug for an article I wrote a year and a half ago or so, the quarterly journal Middle East Policy published an article I wrote, and I believe the title was, "Oman: Steady Progress toward Representative Government," in which I tried to look back over the period of Sultan Qaboos's rule. In it I catalogued and put down for the record the gradual opening up of the political process over which he has presided.

There is now universal suffrage in Oman. Men and women do vote; men and women do sit in a popularly elected advisory body. They don't call it a parliament. They have two bodies: one is appointed and the other is elected.

From sometime in the late '70s or early '80s the sultan very carefully gradually opened up the political process. At first the electorate was very limited. You had to meet certain qualifications like being a property owner. Over time the right to vote was granted to more and more people. It's a wonderful example of how one man's leadership can gradually move a country along toward a more representative system. I'm reluctant to use the word "democratic." It probably wouldn't meet whatever criteria you might pose for being democratic. Omanis are very respectful of one another, and the idea of free-swinging political campaigns among parties in which you criticize your opponent, that is very difficult to imagine in Oman. There are no political parties.

There are alignments or tendencies. The sultan, of course, has no children. He was married only very briefly, so the question of who his successor will be is still before us. It's not one we talked about much in the '80s because he was only in his mid-40's then. As time has passed it's become a question which probably pre-occupies more Omanis and more outsiders as well. He's 67 or 68 now. I've never heard any rumors of bad health, but I wouldn't be in position to know anymore.

There is a procedure set down in what is called "the basic law." They don't call it a constitution. There is a procedure for selecting the next sultan. If the people charged with this duty do not agree, the sultan has written two names inside of an envelope which is sealed. There are two copies of it, one in Muscat, one in Salalah. Supposedly if the group, which is primarily family members, are unable to agree on the next ruler, they are supposed to open the envelope and decide between the two names which the sultan has written. I'm not sure why he thinks that would actually happen. In any case we obviously don't know how the transition will proceed. It's a question that no doubt occupies the attention of our embassy staff there right now.

Q: What about education and the role of women in the society?

CECIL: In a way you're pushing me up to the modern era, and I hesitate to say much about it.

Q: Let's talk about the time you were there.

CECIL: A lot of government resources have been dedicated to education. They established the university during my time. In the summer or fall of '86 the university opened its doors. It has just as many women students as men; in fact, perhaps a slight majority of women, so education has been very important. Women are not normally veiled as they are in Saudi Arabia. Some more conservative families might wear a veil. I have certainly seen veiled Omani women. You find Omani women working in banks, working in professional positions in offices. Some of them have been very important in the business sector. In some ways I would compare it with Kuwait where women are full participants in society. We could see, certainly, the beginnings of that.

I recall a little meeting I attended once where the head of our U.S.-Omani Joint Commission signed an agreement with the minister of education. We were assisting in some way in the educational system. The Omani minister told a story on himself. He said he had a few months earlier signed some kind of an agreement with the Chinese minister of education who had come on a visit. After they signed the agreement they were having their tea, and the minister was chit-chatting with the Chinese. The Omani minister was very proud. He said, "We have a hundred thousand children now in our primary school system." He continued, "How many do you have in your system?" Without blinking the Chinese minister said, "Three hundred million." [laughter] Even in the mid '80s they were already devoting resources to educate both sexes, which is the point of the story.

Q: There must have been a significant number of expatriates particularly, I imagine, from Pakistan, maybe India, maybe Bangladesh in the area doing all the work.

CECIL: Like the rest of the Gulf, Oman has turned to the Indian sub-continent for its manual labor needs. There are historic ties to Baluchistan in Pakistan. Oman, in fact, owned part of the current-day Pakistan for a long time. One of the earlier rulers-I don't think it was Sultan Qaboos's father, but it could have been-sometime back in the colonial era sold their land in Baluchistan. There's been a lot of cultural interchange, a lot of settlement, migration. There's a strong Baluchi element in Omani society. Most Omanis will recognize them by their names, not so evident to me. I think some of the influence in Omani dress comes from the India and Pakistani area. What the Omani call a turban is different from the 'agal and ghutra that the Arabs of the Gulf wear. So yes, they turn to those three countries especially: Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh for manual labor.

Q: Are they at all a factor of political concern?

CECIL: No.

Q: Were they at the time?

CECIL: No. They keep a very low profile. I think there have been some protests in Dubai and Abu Dhabi about low pay and lack of workers' rights and protection. I remember hearing recently, about two or three years ago, about construction projects in Dubai being stopped because the Indian or sub-continent workers were protesting. I've never heard of that happening in Oman. It may have happened and just escaped my attention.

Q: I would think that for an embassy you were obviously tapping into sources of information, political and economic and all, that the merchants would have been a prime source-the Omani merchants because they were an entrepreneurial people from time immemorial Did you find this true?

CECIL: They certainly were an important modernizing element. They certainly turned to Western countries and companies to help build the infrastructure that Oman was building at that time. I don't think that they were active politically. They didn't want to do anything to create problems for themselves. They just concentrated on the business sector.

I don't think I would ascribe a strong political role to them. In general, if you had to make generalizations, I guess you would say that they favored trends toward openness. If it was difficult to get a visa, that could cause problems in carrying out projects, for instance, so they probably would have been a force for liberalizing visa policy. I'm extrapolating a little bit here beyond what I specifically remember.

I can give you another example of the Omani efforts to control information flow, going back again to the travel question, the appointment question, and the Peace Corps question. Sometime, I don't know exactly when it started. Sometime during my time there the sultan was given access to the U.S. Armed Forces Radio and Television Network TV signal. The TV signal was received from a satellite, received by a ground station somewhere out near the airport and was then repeated in a narrow band along the coast to the sultan's palace so that he could receive every day the latest news and whatever else the U.S. armed forces happened to be broadcasting. It was the news we were told which was of most interest to the sultan. Again, you have to remember it's the mid '80s. There's no internet. Newspapers would arrive days after publication.

Q: CNN was not a factor in those days?

CECIL: I don't remember CNN. We had the BBC. We were outside the VOA broadcast area. VOA reception was impossible or very, very difficult. You could listen to the BBC on the radio and get your news that way, but to actually see broadcast televised news, the AFRTS signal was quite a nice thing to have. Its broadcast signal was repeated in this narrow band to the sultan's palace. If you happened to live close to that band, you could pick it up. All you needed was the television set. Because of the location of the airport and the palace which were maybe 10 or 15 miles apart I'm guessing, most of the residential area of Oman, of the Muscat capital area, was within that band width. There was a time when we all enjoyed watching the AFRTS news.

However, again, some senior Omanis, I don't know who they were, but I think they felt that the news that we broadcast was a little bit too free-wheeling. There was one particular case I think was responsible for what happened. I believe it was in Massachusetts there was a terrible incident in which a woman was raped in a pool hall on a pool table. There was a trial going on at the time, and every day the news would carry reports of the latest testimony in this trial. That was just too much. The Omani leadership said, "We can't have our people listening to this sort of thing," so the signal was not stopped but it was encoded. The sultan was given the decoder and he could still receive the news, but normal people like us weren't given the decoders so we were no longer able to have access to the news. The ability to receive it lasted for a few weeks, maybe a few months, I don't remember again, but we all were very sorry when it stopped.

One other thing that needs to be noted is that after I was there two years, John Countryman left. He finished his three year tour as ambassador and departed in late summer, maybe mid-summer, '85. He was succeeded in September by the first political appointee ambassador to Oman, a fellow named Cran for Cranwell, Montgomery.

Q: Whom I interviewed, by the way.

CECIL: Cran Montgomery worked 10 years for Senator Howard Baker as his foreign policy expert when Baker was in the senate, and part of that time majority leader. Cran was very well informed about Middle Eastern issues. He didn't need any help, really, with the issues. He was quite well versed especially in the Israeli-Palestinian problem. He came in September. He had not, of course, worked in the State Department, and I guess that's the typical classic role of the DCM when you have a political appointee. You keep the embassy running and occasionally have to remind the political appointee of certain rules and regulations that we have to follow. That was a good experience for me to work with a political appointee. He had fresh new ideas.

One of the first things he did was when we had an aircraft carrier out in the Gulf of Oman, he arranged a visit, and he took the foreign minister Yusuf Al-Alawi Abdullah and his 11 year old son out to visit the carrier. They had a wonderful demonstration of takeoffs and landings on the carrier, and you were treated very, very well. It made a wonderful beginning of his relationship with Yusuf Al-Alawi. I remember Cran writing a telegram back to Washington when it was over just summing up the benefits as he saw it. He said, "Every ambassador really needs to have one of these aircraft carriers offshore!"

[laughter]

CECIL: Another example after Cran came-not that Cran had anything to do with this-another example of the importance with which we regarded Oman was that Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Dick Murphy came to Oman in November of '85 to brief Yusuf Al-Alawi on the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. We wanted to show to the Omanis how much we valued their friendship. I'm sure Murphy probably also stopped in Saudi Arabia and probably Kuwait. I don't know his itinerary now. Nevertheless, the fact that he came to Oman was very much appreciated.

We had other visits. We had Admiral Poindexter, who was at the time National Security Advisor. Donald Rumsfeld was sent on a special mission. He at the time did not have a government position, but he came out to discuss the problem regarding purchases of aircraft. So we had a lot of high level attention all during that period. We had not too many CODELs, though., Congressional Delegations.

I remember one group of four senators spending the night with us, but they were essentially on their way to Pakistan, and they needed a place for crew rest and overnight for their air crew. That was Senator Glenn, Senator Nunn, Senator Johnston, and Senator Sasser, and their wives. They came into Oman the afternoon of one day, spent the night with us. We gave them a driving tour of the town, an hour, hour and a half embassy briefing, then sent them on their way. These were always valuable opportunities for us to be able to talk to members of the Congress about the importance of our relationship, and I'm sure they probably learned something. We probably learned something, too, from their questions, just listening to their concerns.

Q: Given the controls of the Omani government, how did your USIA-your information officer-operate? What was he doing?

CECIL: Dan Sreebny was there when I arrived. The name of his successor was Karl Nelson. I don't recall particular problems associated with our effort. I guess all I can say is that either means the PAO was able to handle them without bringing them to the front office or there weren't any particular problems. I'm sure we had an international visitor program with certain grants to Omanis to visit the States. I don't think that was a problem. There were some Omanis coming to the States for education, probably not so many as were going to the UK, again because of the traditional role of the UK but they were beginning to come to the States.

One thing we haven't talked about is what you might call family life or living conditions in Oman in that period. We might say a few words about that.

I would say on the whole it was a good family post for Foreign Service families. As I suggested earlier, it was safe. It was secure. It was a wonderful country for outdoor activity. It's a very beautiful country because of the mountains, and it has along the coast deep mountain valleys, waddies as they call them. We spent a lot of time camping in family groups from about October till March.

After mid-March you really couldn't do it. The temperatures would be so high that there would be no pleasure in it at all. But in those five or six winter months the temperatures were wonderful. You could go anywhere as long as you used common sense and didn't intrude on Omani villagers' housing and you were careful about their gardens. Nobody would bother you. You were perfectly secure and safe anywhere, so we spent a lot of time out. I remember a note, a letter home, about the climate. In December of 1984 we were driving back from the UAE, and we came across the north from Sharjah over to what's called Khor Fakkan where we spent the night. The next day, driving on the coast down to Muscat, we actually saw rain. It was the first time in 18 months that we had seen any rain in Oman. It's a very, very dry climate. We never had to worry about rain gear when you went camping.

I had three children. When we arrived in '83 my oldest son was almost 13, going into the eighth grade. His sister was 11, and my youngest son was just six. The 13 year old went to what was called the Sultan's school. There was no American school in Oman, but the Sultan had established a school basically for rich, well-to-do Omani families to prepare their children to go to the university either in the UK or the U.S. The school had an American headmaster. It followed an American curriculum, American text books. It was taught in English. Arabic was taught to the Omanis as a course required for them but not required for people like my son although he did take the basic Arabic that they had for foreign students.

He went there for the entire eighth grade but although it was a high school, we couldn't keep him after the eighth grade because we learned after a few months that it really wasn't up to the American level. As we looked carefully at the text books being used, we saw words like in introduction to teachers-the preface for teachers-say things like, "This is a very carefully designed text book for the academically challenged student." It made good sense if you think about it for the Omanis. English was a foreign language, so it was very hard for them probably to read all this material in a foreign language, so the language was somewhat simplified. The material was somewhat simplified. But if English was your mother tongue, our son was just sailing right through, had homework he could do in half an hour. We saw he couldn't continue at that level if we really wanted him to be prepared for good universities, so for the ninth grade and the tenth while we were still there, he came back to the States to a boarding school.

Q: Where did he go?

CECIL: He went to Northfield-Mount Hermon in western Massachusetts where a lot of Foreign Service kids go. Our daughter, who was in the sixth grade when we arrived, was the only American in her class at what was called the Muscat English Speaking School, MESS, a British school. Our six year old who was I guess in kindergarten, first, and second grades while we were there, he also was the only American in his class. In the total school, which I recall went through the eighth grade, the total enrollment was seven percent American. The vast majority were British. There was a sprinkling of other nationalities.

It was a different approach to education than we were used to in the United States. My daughter once said to me, "Dad, how could you do this to your child?" because the British use such techniques as ridicule in the classroom if the student doesn't always have the right answer. The teachers were not using the same traditions and techniques we're used to in our schools, so it was a little bit difficult for our children, but I think they also got a good education out of it.

We still in those days had to boil our water even though I say the infrastructure was fairly modern. The regional medical officers still advised us to boil our water. We still had to take malaria medication not because there was malaria in the capital area but because if we went out of the capital area into those mountain waddies and into the villages, there was still malaria being borne by mosquitoes.

Especially after we lost the few months there of the AFRTS TV news, I turned to my step-dad back in the States and asked him if he would please record 60 Minutes for us every Sunday and send it out on video tape, so that's one way we kept up with serious news by getting the weekly video tapes from home.

On the whole it was a good family environment. Our children did not have many opportunities to make Omani friends. My son made a few at the Sultan's school, but since he was there only one year, that didn't carry on. You always regret that you don't have more opportunities to interact with the local culture.

Omanis did not seek us out socially. They would come. The parents, especially the fathers, would come if we had a diplomatic reception or if we invited them to dinner or lunch, would usually come, but the women did not usually come to those kinds of social gatherings, so there was not a whole lot of family interaction and certainly none between children.

Q: What was the relationship with the British embassy?

CECIL: I think we would say it was very good and very proper. One of my two best friends in the British foreign service to this day is the fellow who was the deputy chief of mission, head of chancery I guess was his title during those years. We certainly had a very fine and cooperative relationship. We tried to pool our knowledge about Oman as best we could. You couldn't escape the feeling prevalent in the British community outside the embassy as I mentioned earlier.

Q: It was sort of the last...

CECIL: If we gained any influence it was at their expense, but at the working level between our embassies, I'm sure my ambassadors-both of them-had very good relationships with the British ambassador and my relationship with my counterpart was fine and had absolutely no complaints and as I say, we've been friends ever since.

If you have more questions, I can try.

Q: Only what I can come up with right now is, was Iraq at all impressed with us?

CECIL: They had an embassy. They were watched carefully by the Omanis. There was concern about what they might be wanting to do, but I don't know of any incidents that ever were brought to anyone's attention. I think I would have to say it was probably not a major issue, just one you always wanted to keep your eye on if you were an Omani.

Q: I'm not quite sure at the time of the country was the Democratic People's Republic of South Yemen?

CECIL: PDRY: People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

Q: They'd been beaten in the war, but what was happening there? Was there any spillover? Was there concern about that or not?

CECIL: I think that was considered as an issue that was behind us in the mid '80s. There was no diplomatic relationship between Oman and the PDRY. My history is weak. I can't recall when the PDRY merged with North Yemen to become Yemen as it is today. That's quite a while ago. It could even be easily almost twenty years ago that they merged.

Q: But anyway, it wasn't sort of a cloud over the horizon.

CECIL: Not once the Dhofar rebellion was put down. What happened at that point I guess you would say, as the benefits of development and oil became widespread throughout Oman, any grievances that the southerners had were pretty much addressed. They got medical care. They got education. They got jobs in the expanding economy. Because the sultan's mother was from Dhofar, he always regarded that part of Oman with special interest and concern. Many Dhofaris were brought into the government. I think the grievances they had under the old sultan, the father, pretty much were handled by the son.

Q: Just thinking of a court. Wasn't there a lot of pressure on the sultan to go out and find a young lady and have children by her or not?

CECIL: Pressure. I don't know about pressure. It's commonly said that the sultan is gay. I never fully accepted that. It seemed to me people said it too glibly, sort of implying they know things you don't know. He was married for a short time. That's all we really know publicly. Why the marriage didn't last, I don't know what the real explanation is. I can't say that I'm aware of any pressure for him to go find another wife.

Q: What about Islam? How important was Islam? I'm thinking of particularly they were a more strident form of Islam that we're so concerned with today.

CECIL: There's very little what you would call fundamentalist Islam in Oman. The Omanis are primarily what are called the Ibadhi Muslims. It's the third branch of Islam. It's neither Sunni nor Shia. It has historical roots going back to the 7th century. The sultan himself is a very strong force for moderation. It's out of context on this tape, but I can tell you when I went back to Oman in 2005, I learned in a meeting with another senior foreign diplomat who has good access, let's say. I learned that the sermons that are given in the mosques every Friday throughout the country are first edited, then approved by the sultan. I know this to be true.

The sermons are drafted by the ministry of Awqaf which is Islamic endowments, Awqaf and Islamic affairs. First drafts are done there, and then they're given to the sultan for editing, and he takes this very seriously. They are then distributed to the Imams throughout the country. The sultan is a very broad-minded man. I remember reading one of the commentaries which he wrote, and he drew attention to a statement in the Koran where Mohammad said, "If the Lord thy God had so wanted, He could have made mankind one people." Qaboos points to that to say, "Diversity is God's will. He didn't want us to all speak the same language. He didn't want us to all have the same culture. He wanted us to have the experience of dealing with different cultures, different ways of doing things, different vantage points and outlooks, and this is all part of God's plan."

That's a very tolerant message. That's a 2005 observation, not a 1983 observation, but I suspect the sultan has long been that way.

Q: I would have thought there would have been concern because during this period the Saudis were quite aggressive in schools and mosques, preaching a pretty fundamentalist Islam.

CECIL: You bring another 2005 example to mind from my visit. I went back for three weeks in 2005 just mainly to update myself and also in retirement I've made photography my second career. It was always my hobby, but now I'm interested in third world cultures, especially Islamic culture, so I went back in 2005 to spend three weeks in Oman getting good photographic coverage of the country and the people. I still had friends both in the American embassies and some other embassies in town and some Omani friends.

Another story: Saudi Arabia had sent a group of Imams to Oman, about 30 of them. They were spread around the country in different mosques, and probably every one of them were Wahhabis preaching a very conservative form of Islam. The sultan one day was traveling in the countryside, and when he travels he often travels with a minimal entourage. It was a Friday, and it was time for prayer. They were in some small town or village, I don't know the place, but the sultan said, "We'll go here for prayers."

He went into the mosque, and he took a place in the back without receiving any particular attention. The prayers were conducted. Then the Imam, who was a Saudi, started giving his sermon. One of the points the Saudi said was, "There are many people in this country who do not stop work for the noon prayers. They keep working throughout the day, and this is not a sign of good religious faith and practice." The sultan, who I guess you have to say has a more pragmatic approach to what he thinks his government officials should be doing, he told my friend, "You can't run a modern country like this where you interrupt work for half an hour in the middle of the work day." He stood up, said to the Imam, "As-Salaam aleikum." The imam was aghast to discover the sultan is looking at him across several rows of people and could barely manage the customary reply, "Wa aleikum as-Salaam." That's all that was said. The sultan went on his way, and very shortly afterwards he issued instructions to his ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs that all of the Saudi Imams should be sent home. And they were. So, another evidence that he is very sensitive to any source of fundamentalist influence.

Q: In '86 you left.

Tunisia: Arabic Language FSI Field School

CECIL: That's right. I was considering a number of jobs here and there. We had come from Washington in 1980 to Bamako. It was six years abroad. We could have gone home, but I found an opportunity to go to Tunis. The Department was looking for a Foreign Service Officer to take over the job of being director of the FSI branch for Arabic language training in Tunis. I had always been interested in language studies, and I thought this was a great opportunity. Not only would I be given the opportunity to get a lot of management experience, which sometimes political officers don't get enough of before they become DCMs, but also, it would be a tour in North Africa, so it exposed me to that part of the Arab world. I thought also maybe in the course my Arabic might actually improve if I'm surrounded by all these teachers and all this material. When I heard of the opening, I volunteered for it, and I was very quickly paneled for it.

The question I guess that automatically comes to mind is why doesn't a political officer with a series of good assignments already behind him including two DCM-ships after all and a PAO-ship, why would I want to go to a language school? It's sort of stepping out of the main stream, but I had never been afraid to do that. Going to Bamako as PAO-Public Affairs Officer-was one example of wanting to step out of the mainstream, and so I saw Tunis as just another opportunity to broaden myself. I knew it would be a stimulating intellectual experience, and in retrospect I think I would have to say the two years in Tunis could well be the most stimulating experience of my 35 year career-though there were many.

Q: '86 to '88.

CECIL: '86 to '88, right. The reason the job interested me was that I wanted to be sure that what was being taught was what we really needed in the field. I had talked occasionally to officers who had come through the school, and I had somehow gotten the idea that maybe it was a little bit off-target, maybe it could be more properly focused on what we needed to do our job in the embassies. That was one reason that it caught my interest.

I also wanted to meet a new generation of officers coming up behind me. These would mostly be officers probably in their early 30s. By that time I was 46, so I wanted to meet the new generation. I wanted that North African experience, and I like the idea of being in a language teaching environment.

What I found when I got to Tunis was very interesting. Three of the instructors had come from Beirut when the school was in Beirut. They were instructors I had had in 1971 and '72. Sari Ansari and his wife Khaldia, and Ziyad Kayyal. They were three of the real pillars of the program. What I found was they were still using the methods they had learned in the '60s and applied in the '70s, and here we were in the late '80s and they really hadn't really kept up to date with modern language teaching methodology. There was not a single book in the school on language teaching methodology, which amazed me. There wasn't much communication with Washington on such questions as how to teach the language, and a lot had been learned in the '70s and '80s. None of the Tunis instructors, whether they were the originals from Lebanon or whether they were the three Tunisians that had been hired, had ever been sent to Washington to be qualified as language testers.

FSI had a very rigorous program. The chief of language testing, Thea Bruhn, did great things in standardizing and assuring quality control on testing levels. The Tunisians had never been sent to Washington to become qualified examiners. That was a point of professional sensitivity. They felt like second class teachers because they were not qualified to test and award grades. The Ansaris and Ziad Kayyal were allowed to test.

There were other aspects of the methodology that I thought were old fashioned. They were still using a book that used transliteration where the Arabic was written in the Roman alphabet instead of in the Arabic alphabet. It was a terrible practice that should never have been used. We had a huge collection of selections from Arabic newspapers that had been printed and put into a book. The standard way to treat them in the classroom was to read them and translate them into English.I thought that was missing an opportunity. I knew that you could test comprehension in Arabic by asking a student questions in Arabic and seeing if the student can reply in Arabic. You don't need to translate every word, and you're missing all that opportunity to be speaking Arabic in the classroom if you're translating into English. Things like that.

There were no video materials being used. It was pretty much a new idea. I started getting us several kinds of video materials. I turned to FBIS, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service which was monitoring television news broadcasts throughout the Middle East. I found that they were quite happy to provide us with video tapes of Arabic news broadcasts. We started getting news broadcasts from several countries: Yemen, Jordan, Egypt. I'm not sure we got news from Kuwait, but I found that the Kuwaitis had produced an Arabic version of Sesame Street.

Q: Which is the children's program highly... Most children of a certain age have been introduced to that in the United States and Europe, too.

CECIL: It was such a rich treasure trove of programs. If you look at Sesame Street you see that not only is it teaching young children to read and adding to their vocabulary, but it also consists of cultural features, little educational snippets that are usually only two minutes or three minutes long, but they're conveying something about Arabic culture.

My favorite one that I still remember was a little film of a father telling his 10 year old son the importance of all the steps that they were going through together on the pilgrimage in Mecca. "This is why we do this. This is why we throw the stones. This is why we drink the water." It was a wonderful cultural feature for a 10 year old. Okay, not all of the students thought they were 10 year olds or should be treated like 10 year olds, but nevertheless we made a lot of use of these programs in the classroom, both the news and the Sesame Street. I think it helped bring us forward.

Also during my time I got two of the Tunisians brought to Washington. They did go through the testing, training, and certification program. Later I went to a language teaching conference in England with the Lebanese, Ziad Kayyal, and what I'll call the most gifted Tunisian, Hashmi as-Saghir. We went to probably a three day conference of teachers of Arabic all there to discuss methodology. It was a wonderful intellectual stimulation.

I did other things to try to make the instruction more targeted. I asked all the embassies-our embassies-in the Arab world if they would please send us old invitation cards that they had received to whatever kind of functions they were invited to just so the students could see not only the style because the calligraphy varies a lot but simply what are the normal words and phrases used in an invitation? I asked the same embassies to send us examples of diplomatic notes in Arabic so we could get used to the very flowery and formal openings and closings. Then there's the substance in the middle, so we were dealing with the real diplomatic notes in the classroom and real invitations, calling cards. Sometimes Arabs use really flowery script on their calling cards and on their invitations. That's an art-form in itself. Nevertheless there are certain things you can learn that make it a little bit easier, that will increase your chances of being able to read what they're trying to tell you.

We had when I arrived probably about 18 students of whom six were U.S. military and 12 were Foreign Service. This I should say: Tunis was the second year of instruction. For the State Department the first year took place in Washington right here at FSI, and then you would come to Tunis for your second year. Eleven months, really. Eleven months in Washington, 11 months in Tunis.

For the military they started at the defense language school in Monterey, California. They were all army officers. We didn't have any other service. Most of them had spent 18 months at DLI in Monterey before coming to Tunis. The Defense Department paid us tuition to take these officers in. They were almost all, maybe not everyone, but almost all were destined to become FAOs, Foreign Area Officers, with a specialty in Middle Eastern or North African affairs. They would usually in the course of that program also have a year at a university somewhere to concentrate on the academic side, but they came to Tunis for language.

One of the problems we had was that the Foreign Service Officers would arrive more advanced after their 11 months at FSI than the military officers would be after their 18 months at DLI.. There was always a gap.

Q: What was the problem?

CECIL: I don't know enough about DLI teaching techniques to explain it, but they didn't learn as much at DLI as they did here.

Q: I'm a graduate of the program. I took Russian back in 1951 at Monterrey, but life moves on.

CECIL: I can't explain it. I would just have to say that FSI is more rigorous and more demanding. We spent six hours a day in class here, and you go home with at least two hours of homework a night. Maybe the DLI has other things that they're doing. That was a problem; we always had to deal with trying to place people together. Our classes, of course, never had more than four students per instructor, and making the periodic class assignments was one of the most challenging parts of the director's work because every student wants to be in a class with someone else who's just slightly better than he is.

Q: Absolutely! Did you find that the Monterey people were looking at what was happening, or was this something that was sort of not pointed out to them or what?

CECIL: Of course, I didn't talk to Monterey. I talked to FSI Washington. I noted the problem, but I think it was more up to the dean of the language school to take up the issue. I don't know to what extent they tried to do that.

I learned also at one point that we gave the Defense Department a special break on price, on tuition. I remember writing a note. I think it was Ray Ewing at the time was the dean. He was followed by Ambassador Thayer, so I'm not sure which one of my bosses it was at the time. I said there's no reason to give the Defense Department a discount on tuition! They can pay it fully, but I don't know if anything happened on that, either.

I remember another thing I tried to do to make the instruction more targeted to our needs. When I arrived there was no practicing telephone conversations. That's a very difficult skill to learn, When you have no visible clues, you're not looking at the speaker, it's sometimes harder to follow what's being said to you.

Q: Very, very hard.

CECIL: After a few months in Tunis I was able to come back to Washington for consultations at FSI. During that visit I talked to whatever we called the communications bureau in the State Department about what it would cost to set up an internal closed circuit telephone line inside our school. The school was located in the little suburb of Tunis called Sidi Bou Said, in a traditional-style three-story building of which the first and second floors were used for classrooms.

I said, "We just need an internal telephone system not connected to the outside world just so somebody in one room can call somebody in another room, and they can have a phone conversation." The State Department tech did some back-of-the-envelope calculations, and he said, "You could probably get all the equipment you need, and it could be set up for maybe just a little under a thousand dollars." That doesn't sound like much, but our budget was quite modest. I talked to a private company. I forget now which one, but I know in my notes that their estimate was $700 to do the same thing.

I don't know why, but I just had a hunch. I went to Radio Shack, and I discussed my need at Radio Shack. I said, "You know, this is what I need to do. Do you have anything here that I could do that with?" The guy sold me a two-speaker office intercom made in China for $8.95 and then as a backup I went to Toys R Us, and I found a child's toy called Phone Friend. It ran on batteries, and cost me $16.00.

I went back to Tunis with the Radio Shack equipment and Phone Friend as a backup, and we strung these wires from Radio Shack from one room to another, and that system served us the rest of my time there! We would have a teacher go into one room, and he would call a student in the other room, and they would have a conversation. That was the sort of practical thing that was missing when I arrived and I thought we really needed to bring into the program. I don't know how long it continued. I'm sure the equipment eventually broke, and I doubt that anybody else went to Toys R Us for replacements, but anyway...

That's one of the benefits that I think someone in the State Department realized a long time ago of alternating between Foreign Service Officers and scientific linguists as directors of the overseas language schools. The position title, and I tried throughout my time to get this changed, and I never succeeded. Bureaucracy is very slow to move. The title of that position is Scientific Linguist. I said to Ray Ewing and Mr. Thayer after him, "You know, on my record it would look a little bit better if we could call this position something like FSI School Director. That would apply to both FSOs and the scientific linguists that you sometimes send out."

It never happened during my time. I was always called the Scientific Linguistic in my personnel records even though I had never taken a course in the science of linguistics.

Q: I was just looking at the time, and I was wondering. This might be a good place to stop, Chuck, but I'd like to ask if there's anything else about the language program that you'd like to talk about and then also talk about the students being able to get out and around and that sort of thing. Then let's talk about Tunis and what you were getting out of Tunis and all that the next time.

CECIL: I think actually we can probably... If you have five minutes, we can probably wrap it up. There wouldn't be that much more to talk about next time, and we can probably move ahead.

I wanted to make the point that the scientific linguist's role in overseeing language instruction in my view is always to ensure that we are applying our latest and best understanding of language teaching methodology. To that extent I was trying to become a scientific linguist without benefit of the academic training. I did buy a lot of books and read a lot of books about methodology in my time.

But the role of the Foreign Service Office was to ensure that what the school is teaching is practical and is what the officers really need when they get out into their embassies or out into the field. That's why I think there's such great benefit by alternating back and forth the kind of person we send to direct the school. It hasn't been a one-for-one alternation, but I know there have been quite a few. April Glaspie I think was the first FSO to direct FSI Tunis and then Cameron Hume and then I was the third. There have been some after me. That's really important, I think, that we continue to ensure that from time to time we have a Foreign Service Officer there. That would apply to the schools in Yokohama for Japanese and in Seoul for Korean, and in Taipei for Chinese as well. I think they have probably had some FSO directors there.

We pretty much followed the FSI format as far as class time and effort was concerned-six hours a day in the classroom and then a lot of homework at night. Being in an Arab country did allow opportunities obviously to get into the culture. The Tunisian dialect is a little bit unusual, but we didn't teach Tunisian dialect in Tunis; we taught what we call "modern literary Arabic" or "modern standard Arabic," the Arabic of the radio news broadcasts, basically or the TV news broadcasts. The practice of adjusting your ear and your understanding to a local dialect was just a skill that we would need no matter where we went because every country is different. They speak a different kind of Arabic.

We had some opportunities to travel, not as much travel money available as had been when I went to Beirut but nevertheless the students were able to get out of the school. Every student was encouraged and given the money to make a trip to Israel during our time. I remember one year we were so strapped that all we could do was pay for the airfare, and students had to pay for their food and lodging, but they were willing to do that. I think everyone was willing to do that. That's too bad that a student has to subsidize the U.S. government in that way, but nevertheless we did give people opportunities to travel to other countries and use their language outside the classroom.

Our situation was, as I said, out in the suburb of Sidi Bou Said, so I was not particularly involved in embassy policy discussions. I did attend the weekly country team meeting of the ambassador who was Peter Sebastian when I arrived and Bob Pelletreau for my second year. They were both very supportive of the school and my efforts, but I didn't get much into discussions of Tunisian politics. I was there during the time when Habib Bourguiba was overthrown by Bin Ali. Bin Ali got a bunch of doctors to sign statements saying that Bourguiba was no longer capable of carrying out the duties of the office. He was in fact senile. That happened very quietly and very peacefully. It didn't really affect us. I was also there the time the Israelis went a team into Sidi Bou Said and assassinated one of the Palestinian leaders who lived only about four blocks from our school. They came in at night, went into the house, killed him, and escaped. That certainly was cause for concern. I don't know what else to say about it. It didn't really affect our teaching. We went on without interruption.

At the American School my youngest son... My two oldest kids by that that time, by Tunis, were both in the States at Northfield-Mount Hermon Boarding School, but my youngest son went to the American School in Tunis. He had friends from the PLO because Tunis was the PLO headquarters at the time. I remember one time one of the PLO kids invited my son to a birthday party. We knew that the father was basically an arms procurer for the PLO. My wife wondered briefly about what to do about this invitation, then she just decided, "I'm not going to worry about politics. This little boy is my son's friend. He's invited him to a birthday party. I'm not even going to tell the embassy." She took him, and dropped him off, and picked him up, was invited in for tea by the mother and all that sort of thing.

The one discussion I remember most poignantly was the time in the country team meeting in Tunis where we actually discussed quite seriously, "If you are the elementary school principal and you're our security officer in our embassy and if suddenly one day none of the Palestinian children show up at school, what do you do?" That was a kind of difficult issue we had to think about. What do you do if suddenly the Palestinians stayed home? There are quite a few Palestinian children in the American school. Fortunately, that never happened.

After Tunis... I can't put this on the recording, but I want to show you. This came in the paper one day, and I clipped it out. This was I think from the Washington Post, and my little note here that I put on our bulletin board is dated April 23, 1988. Subject: Second Careers. I addressed it to all Arabists. The attached appeared in the Washington Post classified ad section March 25, 1988: "Car sale person. Sell new and used cars and trucks. Advise clients of availability to meet needs, write contracts, etc. Must speak Arabic, have six months experience. Call such-and-such a number." [laughter] Anybody who loses interest in the Foreign Service has a promising career as a used car salesman in the Washington, D.C. area.

After Tunis in the summer of '88, I did come back to Washington, and we can talk next time about my four years in Washington '88 to '92.

Q: We will do that.

CeciFile 8a

Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and International Scientific Affairs

Q: Today is the 19th of March 2008. Chuck, we're talking about when to when in Washington?

CECIL: We'll cover the summer of '88 to the summer of 1992, the four years in which I was in the bureau of OES (Oceans, Environment, and Scientific affairs.).

Q: Who was the head of OES?

CECIL: When I arrived it was a fellow that we called Dr. Bernthal. He was the assistant secretary. I forget his first name. I don't recall how long he was there, but I think probably only a few months, and then he was followed by Curtis Bohlen whom we called Buff Bohlen. Buff Bohlen came from the environmental community. I forget exactly what his position had been, but during most of my time Buff Bohlen was assistant secretary. The deputy assistant secretary for whom we worked in my part of the bureau was Bill Nitze, William Nitze, son of Paul Nitze who is so well known in international relations and who has been a lifetime supporter of SAIS, The Johns-Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies which is now, in fact, named after him although it wasn't at the time I went there.

My position in the first two years was deputy director of the office we called Ecology, Health and Conservation, EHC. It's no longer got that name. They've had several reorganizations since then. The office director was Walter Lockwood when I arrived.

Q: Before we get to the particular issues, how did OES at that time in the late '80s, early '90s, fit into the Department because it's one of these technical bureaus, but it's got such a broad mandate that I would imagine it was somewhat of an awkward fit.

CECIL: I don't know about awkward, but it was one of several functional bureaus. OES itself was divided into three parts as the title indicates. The environmental part was the part I worked in and know the best, but then the O stands for Oceans. There were two offices, if I recall correctly, in the oceans division, one dealing with such issues as fisheries and law of the sea issues, another dealing with the polar issues, North Pole and Antarctica, South Polar issues,

The other division was the science and technology division... I'm not sure exactly how many offices it consisted of, but they dealt with such things as bilateral science and technology agreements. They had an office dealing with the space station and all of our international cooperation in space.

There was another office dealing with nuclear issues, nonproliferation issues. One of those offices, I think it was the bilateral science office, had a special interest in intellectual property issues, IPR issues. I should say about the environmental part, there were three offices in the environmental part. I'm not sure all were in existence the month I arrived, but the third one might have been created right about the time I arrived.

I was in EHC, and using our terminology back then we said we dealt with the "green" issues. Those were such things as biodiversity, wetlands preservation, desertification, forestry issues. We had a number of international treaties or organizations that dealt with biodiversity and endangered species issues, and we were responsible for supporting the U.S. government's participation in its relations with those organizations such asIUCN-International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources-or something called the Ramsar Convention which dealt with wetlands issues or ITTO, the International Tropical Timber Organization. Also, the World Heritage Convention. We had one member of our office who carried the "H" part, the health part. That was Dr. Austin Moede. He was a regular doctor from our medical bureau at State Department, but he was assigned to our office sort of like an excursion tour. He was not handling patients as the medical bureau normally does. He was there to track the AIDS issue and the international efforts to focus attention on AIDS. This was 1988, remember.

Q: 1988, so AIDS was just coming to the forefront.

CECIL: Right. We didn't understand the disease very well, and we really were in the early stages of trying to organize an international effort to address the problem, and that's what Austin Moede did for the State Department, sitting in our office.

The other important environmental office, sort of a mirror image of ours, handled what we called the "brown" issues. I forget the initials used to name that office, but by the brown issues we meant the pollution issues, hazardous waste disposal, the problems of dealing with the ozone layer and that sort of thing.

The third office that was created about that time was set up to handle the problem of climate change and global warming. The international community was starting to organize itself into a huge international body. I hope I remember the initials before we're finished with this, but in any case, a third office under a fellow named Dan Reifsnyder was set up to coordinate our participation in the international effort to address climate change.

For me the attraction of the job was that it was totally different from anything that I had done before. As the tapes show, I had spent all my career up to this point in either Africa or the Middle East, so this was a great opportunity to have more functional bureau experience. I had served earlier in political-military affairs, the first functional bureau I worked in, but that was some years back, so I really welcomed the chance to have another opportunity to see our international relations from the functional bureau side.

Environmental issues were something I had a personal interest in but never had any opportunity to get very informed about, so I really was looking forward to having at least two years-at the beginning I thought it would be two-to learn about environmental issues. From a career point of view also, it was my first introduction to multilateral diplomacy. My previous years had been pretty much focused on bilateral diplomacy and trying to deal with whatever country I was in at the time or in Washington backstopping the embassy and whatever country it was.

But here I was introduced to the world of international conferences and negotiations to try to reach various kinds of agreements, so over the next what turned out to be four years, I went to places that were totally new to my career path. I made several visits to Geneva to the UN headquarters there, went to Bergen, Norway and to Perth, Australia, to Brasilia, to Paris. We can talk about reasons for these things later on.

Then I also saw going into OES as turning a page. I'll admit to some frustration in my efforts to become fluent in Arabic. I had seriously studied the language every time I was in the Arab world. Some of the time, of course, I was in Africa, but whenever I was back in the Arab world I renewed my efforts. I never could seem to break through the 3-plus barrier. I kept getting S-3 pluses, R-3 pluses, and even after those two years in Tunis where I was heading the language school,. I still didn't absorb enough to get to the four level. I was kind of frustrated by that.

I remember one morning walking down from the Foggy Bottom metro stop to the Department. It probably was my first week in OES. I felt free and liberated. I said, "Well, I'm turning the page. It's over. My attempts to conquer Arabic are behind me. I'll never be back in that part of the world again, and I'm going to focus now on these new issues." As time went by I really didn't abandon Arabic totally.

Q: It's like the tar baby. In the State Department if you got touched with Arabic, you just don't go away.

CECIL: There's another interesting thing about OES that you probably would ask me if I let you. It's an unusual bureau in that it has a high percentage of civil servants. The geographic bureaus normally, of course, have a very high percentage of Foreign Service Officers doing their stateside tours. But OES, I don't know what the percentage would be, but it's always had a high percentage of civil servants. The main reason for that is that the issues first of all are very technical and very complex. They require a solid background, good knowledge, and sometimes it's difficult to get real, real depth in a quick two-year tour that an FSO normally would have.

Another reason is a lot of these international negotiations take years to come to fruition, so you need an institutional memory-a civil servant who's in the job for five years, 10 years, 15 years. There are many, but I know a lady in EHC when I was there is still there. She's now the office director, but that would mean she's been there more than 20 years.

That creates a kind of tension inside the Foreign Service and the Department and the bureau. The Department repeatedly says that it needs FSOs with expertise in science and technology, but if you don't offer career officers the opportunity to be office directors or better, it's a disincentive. It makes it hard sometimes for the bureau to attract good FSOs. In fact, since I left I'm pretty sure that the percentage of civil servants has increased beyond even what it was when I was there. I think the Department is always going to be faced with that dilemma. How do you get good Foreign Service Officers into a career specialty when you don't offer them the future possibility of being office directors and policy managers?

I could illustrate some more about my work, but maybe you have some more questions before we go into more specific things.

Q: I do want to move. You take specific issues and what you were doing. You were there at the end of the Reagan administration and into the George Bush, Sr. administration. Ronald Reagan had sort of disparaged the environmental concerns. At least he had the reputation of doing this when he ran for president before. He wasn't a great tree hugger. During this time how did you feel about the Reagan, Bush and then the team from the White House, the support for the various issues that OES was concerned with? Was it just off their radar, or was there a push or a drag or what?

CECIL: I think certain parts of the bureaus were very much on their radar especially climate change, global warming. Since I wasn't working on global warming I would be hesitant to say much about that for fear of being off base, but I do believe that the hesitancy, the reluctance to commit our government and our nation to targets and timetables existed back then as well. I think certainly the environmental community was anxious to move much faster than the administration was. Some foreign governments were willing to move faster as well.

I think there was a kind of a brake always being applied by the White House with political considerations in mind. I don't think we noticed that so much in our office. It's hard to argue against preserving biodiversity. That's not absolutely true; obviously logging interests oppose efforts to preserve habitat for the spotted owl in the Pacific Northwest. It's hard to argue against safeguarding tropical forests. Wetlands, that's somewhat controversial because it gets into domestic land usage and the role of the corps of engineers and things like that. Anytime you begin to affect negatively someone's economic interests you provoke opposition.

I don't think I have any clear examples from my area of work. I do have an example of how the first Bush administration actively promoted environmental work. The first Bush administration supported something called the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative which was focused on Latin America. I will give you some examples of that later on. That was more of my last two years in OES rather than my first two.

Q: Let's talk about the first two years. What were you dealing with?

CECIL: I looked at my performance report for September 1988 which is the month I actually began. I looked to see what were the specific objectives that my rating officer identified for me to address during that first reporting period. At the top of the list was finishing a report to the Congress on the importance of environmental issues in the multilateral and bilateral economic assistance programs. The Congress wanted the World Bank to consciously and methodically pay attention to environmental factors when it was evaluating loan proposals or project proposals. Up to that point I guess there had been really no systematic or institutionalized requirement to do that. The Congress was leading policy in that area at the time, and the State Department was bringing together a report on the subject.

My second specific objective was to manage and coordinate the U.S. government's position on something called the World Commission on Environment and Development. This was an international effort being led by the prime minister of Norway, Gro Harlem. Brundtland. Again, it was an international effort to focus more attention on the importance of environmental issues in economic development. It basically coined... Maybe didn't coin, but it certainly gave life to the term sustainable development, which was a fairly new idea back then, the idea that development efforts must be undertaken with the future generations in mind so you don't undermine the ability of future generations to sustain whatever it is you're doing or developing or doing today.

A third item was to work on tropical deforestation initiatives, try to focus more attention on those.

The fourth item was that I should get to know the various environmental groups in Washington, D.C. That was a wonderful part of my job. I really enjoyed getting to know people working in those organizations in Washington. I must have known easily half a dozen or eight or ten different organizations that first year. They were wonderful people to work with.

I was supposed to start learning about what was called Debt for Nature swaps, a fairly new idea back then. The idea was that, and it didn't apply solely to the United States, any country can do this, but the idea was that the United States would forgive foreign countries' debt owed to us in exchange for that country's commitment to take those resources in local currency and devote them to environmental purposes. It was a very interesting topic, and it also helped me learn more about the economics of environmental issues and gave me reasons to work with the bureau of economic affairs at State and also with Treasury department and sometimes with other agencies in our government.

In the summer of 1989 I drafted a letter for Secretary Baker to send to the secretary of the Treasury, Secretary Brady, in which Secretary Baker supported the idea of Debt for Nature swaps. That was an important statement of policy. The State Department had not expressed itself at such a high level on that issue up to then, and so I was happy to do it.

Q: Do you know what caused the commitment?

CECIL: I think the idea originated in the environmental community, and I think it's an example of their ability to marshal public pressure on the government, on the administration. It was a good idea, and I think the administration was smart enough to recognize that it was a good idea. It was politically good and appealing. Secretary Baker was certainly smart enough to see that. So it helped the administration demonstrate its commitment to environmental action. In a lot of cases the idea that we would be repaid for some of these loans was probably a little bit pie-in-the-sky anyway. We might never get repaid in some cases, so to get a commitment from the borrower to say, "Okay, I don't have to pay you dollars, but I'll devote whatever it is, pesos or sucres or bolivars or whatever to environmental action in my own country." That was maybe a good exchange.

Those are my goals and objectives for that first period ending in the spring of '89.

Q: Let's talk about the first item on that list of goals and objectives.

CECIL: Writing that report to the congress on the importance on getting the international lending agencies to bring environmental factors into consideration.

Q: We're talking now, of course, if you say environment, everybody's been involved in environment. In that period, 1989, was there some problem or a lack of great interest in the environment or not?

CECIL: Where? We had a very active NGO community.

Q: Yes, but I'm talking about what you were trying to inspire by writing this letter showing what's happening.

CECIL: I'm not sure how to address the question. I wouldn't want to say there was a lack of interest. Perhaps a better term was to say there was a growing awareness of the importance of environmental issues, but not yet expressed in policy-relevant criteria. There were lots of studies being done by the NGOs, some by the government, but we were just beginning to become aware of the problem of to take an example-the ozone layer and the hole in the ozone layer. Studies were showing the impact that had on global health because of increased ultraviolet radiation coming down to the surface of the earth and creating skin cancer and things like that.

There were tremendous statistics coming out of Brazil on the rate of deforestation. Brazil was paving roads into the Amazon, and it was like the Wild West. People were going there, grabbing land, chopping down the trees, and planting coffee or raising cattle. The environmental community was alarmed at the rate of deforestation. The same thing was happening in West Africa, the West African countries near the coast. Ivory Coast and others were chopping down forests and exporting the timber for short-term economic gain. It was a time of waking up to the importance of these issues.

I think the State Department had a very important and legitimate role it needed to play in dealing with other countries. It was quickly realized you couldn't address any of these environmental issues simply within your own borders. They almost all had international ramifications. There was the problem of acid rain, which was a major irritant with Canada. It's a good example of showing how something that happens in one country spills over into the neighboring country, so there was a great need for coordinating international action on all of these issues. That's the role of the State Department.

Q: Did you feel our embassies' reporting, was pretty good on these issues?

CECIL: There wasn't a whole lot of reporting in those days on these issues. It was not a mainstream type of reporting, and the number of what we now I think call EST officers-Environment, Science, and Technology officers-was very small. Normally in most embassies you'd find it was the economic officer probably who took on whatever reporting in this area was done, but unless it really was a major issue of our concerns for the country, it probably wouldn't be addressed. By that I mean, suppose you were the economic officer in Abidjan where I later served. If you saw the rate at which the tropical forests were being chopped down and the timber being exported, you might address that simply on the grounds of saying, "How long can they sustain this, and what's going to take the place of all the tress that have been chopped down? What efforts is the country doing to create a renewable forestry base? That's the kind of report that maybe someone would send in. I don't think we had a lot of environmental reporting in those days. I think the real driving force was the private sector, the NGOs.

Q: Let's talk about the NGOs. This was your contact group. How did you find them? Did you find that, I won't say just the State Department, but the U.S. government was almost the enemy, or at least the opponent. Did they view you with suspicion?

CECIL: I suppose most of the NGOs were somewhat disappointed that the government was not willing to move faster to address these issues. I never felt like they regarded me as an enemy, certainly not me personally. If they had any of those kinds of feelings they directed them higher up in the administration. They would address those feelings to the White House usually. Certainly my relations were very cordial and cooperative. I think there was no animosity in our relationships at what you might call the working level. Once Curtis Bohlen came in as assistant secretary, he came from the environmental community, so certainly the NGOs felt that they had a friend in the Department. He did a lot. He had very good ties up on the Hill. I think sometimes he was out ahead of the rest of the administration in working with members of congress to get things done and get money appropriated. I think the working relationship between the bureau and the environmental community was quite good.

Q: Were there members of congress who were really pushing for things to happen and ones who were very skeptical? Did you get involved in that State Department/Congressional relationship?

CECIL: No. It was above my pay grade, I guess you would say. I do remember Senator Tim Wirth of Colorado was known as a very strong environmental advocate and, in fact, after he left the Senate he became Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, where he worked on global environmental and population issues. That was later, during the Clinton years.

Q: Al Gore as a Senator was known to be very concerned and interested in the environment, and he was at that time working on his book, Earth in the Balance.

CECIL: I recall a friend of mine who had good relations with Senator Gore and his office. She told me once that she had gone in to the Senator's office when he was working, and he turned away from his typewriter, I guess it was a typewriter in those days, and maybe it was a computer. She said he was typing his book, the text, himself. It wasn't something that had been ghosted out to some other person or to a staff member. She just walked in that day and found him working on his book. Those were two that quickly come to mind.

Opponents? I don't remember. I'm sure there must have been some, but I didn't have any encounters with them.

Q: As you were working on these issues, did you find problems with the geographic bureaus? For example, pushing to keep the Brazilians from chopping down trees? The Brazil desk might say, "Yea, this and that, but they don't like us talking about what they're doing. After all, we did it to our Midwest or something like that."

CECIL: I guess we all realized that every FSO is conscious about our own nation's history, and no one would be surprised with that kind of a push-back, someone saying, "You did it, now why can't we do it?" I don't think we needed to be reminded by the desk officers. We may have been occasionally. It's always important to have the geographic bureaus' vantage point on all of these issues. That's what the whole process of policy formulation is all about, to bring all the views and knowledge together.

I look back on that as a period where the government was beginning to come to grips with these environmental issues. I guess a lot of what's said today would probably not sound very different. We talk about the administration wanting to go slow and saying, "Oh, more studies are needed for this or that." We heard the same things back in the late '80s.

I could give you another example of the first Bush administration's willingness to get more engaged. One of the responsibilities I had was to... It's hard to use the right words here without inflating the job, but I guess I would say to manage or to coordinate our participation in something called the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, called IUCN for short. They don't use Natural Resources when they're making the acronym. That is the most important international environmental organization. Members of that organization can be governments, or at a lower level, government agencies, or non-governmental organizations. I don't believe individuals can be members if I recall correctly.

In 1988 the United States government was not a government member of the organization. We had some agencies who were members. The U.S. Forestry Service was a member. I believe the National Parks Service was a member. Fish and Wildlife Service was a member. They went to meetings of this organization, but we were not participants at the full governmental level. One of my jobs was to build the case for joining, to write the action memo to Secretary Baker and try to convince him that it was time we became a state member. I'm glad to say Secretary Baker agreed with that.

We had some opposition along the way. John Bolton is a name that still lives among us. At that time he was the Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs. Any memo to the Secretary of State proposing that we join a new international organization had to have the approval of the Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs. John Bolton opposed our joining the IUCN on budgetary grounds. He said we were already paying so much money to so many international organizations that he thought we should not take on any new memberships. That's an example of a roadblock that we had to overcome. We had to lobby, basically.

Other bureaus, the geographic bureaus, we had to get them to start saying to the international organization bureau, "This might do us some good." We had to get outside people like the NGOs to find ways to bring it to the attention of the international organization bureau that there would be benefits. In the end, as I say, we got the memo up to Secretary Baker. I don't recall if in the final memo we had to say that the bureau of international organization affairs opposes this because that would be a common way to deal with that in a memo to the Secretary. Whether that point was there or not, Secretary Baker agreed that we should join. We also managed to convince the international organizations bureau that we should increase U.S. government contributions to some other environmental organizations.

We convinced the bureau of international organization affairs to increase our contribution to some international organizations like UNEP, United Nations Environmental Program. For the first time we made significant contributions. We might have made token contributions, but we made the first significant contributions to trust funds for the FAO-Food and Agriculture Organization-and ITTO-International Tropical Timber Organization-for projects to preserve tropical rain forests. We did make progress, but it was difficult always if there was money involved and unfortunately money was involved in most things.

Q: What about two of the huge countries; well, three huge countries I can think of that would cause problems: China, India, and Indonesia, in all these things. These were countries that have a tremendous population and all the pressures of population. How did they play? Were they actors through your time?

CECIL: Again, I'd have to say my office did not encounter Indian or Chinese opposition on issues that we were dealing with. I think the offices that did would be that sister office handling the pollution issues and certainly the office handling climate change because it hasn't maybe changed much today. India and China are still probably the two greatest threats to climate change. They need to take serious actions to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and sulfur dioxide and all the other pollutants. Certainly back then in the late '80s they were not willing to commit to serious targets and timetables. I'm sure that was a problem, but it didn't happen to be a problem for the issues that my office was dealing with.

Indonesia. I don't recall anything particular about Indonesia. They have tremendous tropical forests, and they're an important member of the ITTO. I don't know what they were saying back in those years, but most tropical timber producers would take the position that they needed the revenues from their forests for whatever development purposes they have. They would often resist any kind of controls. I don't know how actively Indonesia did that. I don't know what else to say about that.

Q: Is there anything else? Should we move to the second two years?

CECIL: There's one or two other things to note. I'll just say that in September the following year, September of '89, Walt Lockwood, my office director, left for an assignment in London, and he was succeeded by another FSO named Eleanor Savage. She was my boss for the next nine months or so.

In another performance evaluation report written covering the period April of 1990 to September of 1990, two examples were listed that I think are good examples of how the State Department sometimes has to fight to maintain or to assure its role in some of these issues, particularly these involving EPA and the Treasury Department.

Q: The Environmental Protection Agency.

CECIL: Right. There was a tendency on the part of the EPA to initiate and carry out its own negotiations with foreign governments without telling the State Department. I guess it's natural that everyone seems to think they are free to do their own thing as long as they think it's within their mandate, and maybe their view of their mandate is just either broader than we think it should be, or maybe you would say narrower than we think it should be because sometimes we thought EPA was really getting into the business of international negotiations, and we think that's the job of the State Department.

We had to constantly keep in touch with EPA, be on the phone with our counterparts and make sure that we knew what they were doing so if it looked like they were getting off the reservation or getting out ahead of us, we could go to the front office and phone calls could be made and State people could be invited to participate or we could have meetings to make sure that what was being done or said was acceptable to all of us.

Treasury Department was especially aggressive in anything that had to do with debt or money. We found at one time that the Treasury department was drafting legislation and a draft executive order for the president that would greatly increase Treasury authority over policy issues in Latin America. Again, it leads into the issue of debt for nature swaps which we'll talk about in the next two years.

Treasury wanted to become the primary judge of investment incentives and economic reforms taken by Latin American countries. That's one of the roles of the State Department's bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, to try to follow those kinds of economic issues. It's a case where a lot of time had to be spent making sure we were informed of what other U.S. government agencies in town were doing and trying always to keep us on the same page.

Q: If push came to shove between two departments, would this go to the White House, or how would these things be settled?

CECIL: I think in most cases I could say that it would be worked out by our Assistant Secretary calling his counterpart in whatever agency it would be. The Assistant Secretary for Environment affairs-OES I should say-would call the head of EPA or at a slightly lower level, EPA had its own office of international affairs, and there would be a lot of back and forth there. I think most issues could be resolved at that level.

Same at the Treasury department. They had a deputy assistant secretary who dealt with international issues of this kind. I forget his exact title. In most cases people didn't want issues to go to the White House but in the National Security Council there were White House people dealing with environmental issues, and sometimes we did go to them. There was also the Council on Environmental Quality, I believe it was called. They had offices on Lafayette Square looking at the White House. It's a White House agency. We dealt with them quite a bit. A lot of meetings had White House or NSC representatives attending because they, too, wanted to know what the agencies were doing. We managed to work most things out at that level.

Q: Your second OES tour, your last two years?

CECIL: In September of 1990 the bureau created a new job for me actually in the front office, technically in State Department terms it was considered a short tour, and it was intended to be created to deal with a specific issue, and then when that issue was over there would not be a successor. The position would disappear. I think we had to do that a year at a time if I recall because I did wind up staying there two years.

The first year from September of '90 until roughly the following summer, I worked for a new deputy assistant secretary. Bill Nitze had gone by that time, and we had a man named Robert Rheinstein. He was my rating officer on my OER, and my reviewing officer was Assistant Secretary Curtis Bohlen. I had two primary jobs that they wanted me to do.

As I mentioned, we did join IUCN as a state member, as a government. In November of 1990 there was what they call a general assembly. That organization every three years has a general assembly, and all the members come together and review issues and pass resolutions, and make decisions of various kinds. This was going to be the first general assembly in which the United States government as a whole would participate. I was asked to prepare our positions on all the issues that were going to be raised. Most of the initiatives would come from international NGOs. Some would come from other governments.

We have to review the proposals and decide what's acceptable and what we could work to amend and so on and so forth. That meeting was scheduled to be in Perth, Australia, from November 26 to December 5, 1990. I ended up leading the U.S. government delegation. We had 12 members in our delegation. It might not have been 12 agencies, but it was almost 12 different agencies. There may have been one or two cases where there were two people from an agency. I worked on that, and I'll give you one or two little examples of what that entailed.

The other major focus of my work was the Bush Enterprise for the Americas Initiative that I mentioned earlier. In June of 1990 President Bush announced this debt for nature swap program. The Enterprise for the Americas Initiative was one of those periodic attempts for the United States to assure Latin America that we were giving them the attention they deserved. We have to do that every 10 or 15 years it seems. EAI as we called it had trade and investment and debt and environmental components. My job was to deal with the environmental component and to work very closely with the Treasury department in deciding how to handle the debt for nature swap.

My efforts were focused on producing a model bilateral agreement that we would sign with as many countries as could qualify in Latin America. The Treasury department would handle the details of the debt swap, the cancellation of dollars owed to the United States and deciding how much local currency those governments would put into an environmental fund. The agreement that we were hoping to negotiate with these countries would set up local commissions or organizations, committees, to accept environmental proposals, and to decide what criteria they had to meet and how the money could be disbursed and things like that.

I led a large interagency working group here in Washington to come up with a model text for an agreement, and in the course of 1991 and 1992 over a period of about six months, we negotiated agreements with Jamaica, Bolivia, and Chile. Those were the first three.

The negotiator was actually Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Richard Smith. He became my boss the second year and took over from Robert Rheinstein who passed the duties to Smith. I was basically Smith's staff person if you will, to organize this interagency effort and come up with these texts that we then used as a basis for negotiation once the Congress had finally authorized the debt forgiveness. We did need the Congress to do that because it had a budgetary impact. If you're forgiving debt, that's got to be authorized by the Congress and taken into account. The Congress finally authorized that in November of 1990, so once that happened we were able then to proceed with our work.

I want to say one more thing about the IUCN meeting in Perth. I think there's a little vignette there that is a good example of how sometimes narrow viewpoints can slow down our work and hinder us. As we were approaching November of 1990 a number of Spanish speaking countries announced that they were going to propose that the IUCN adopt Spanish as its third working language. Up to that point the working languages were English and French. There were a lot of Spanish speaking members, governments, and organizations, so it seemed like a logical proposal. But, of course, it would have a budgetary impact because they would have to hire new translators, and they would have to begin preparing official materials in Spanish.

Mr. Bolton, who was still Assistant Secretary for International Organizations, opposed the proposal because, again, of the budgetary impact. Therefore, no one in his bureau would clear memos to the Secretary where we were summing up the positions that we wanted to take at the coming meeting. They wouldn't clear the memo. They said, "You can't have that in there because our assistant secretary doesn't agree."

As it happened, President Bush was about to start a trip to South America, and the way the calendar worked out, he was going to arrive at his first stop, I think it was Santiago, Chile. I'm a little vague on the destination after all these years, but he was going to arrive at his first stop at South America a day or two after the opening of the general assembly meeting in Perth. I went to OES Assistant Secretary Bohlen, and I said, "You know, this will be pretty bad publicity for the president's arrival if we're opposing an adoption of Spanish as a working language at the IUCN. It's kind of a bad juxtaposition of events." Buff Bohlen saw the issue immediately, and he called John Bolton and explained what bad publicity this would raise and said, "The amount of money really isn't very much." He obtained Mr. Bolton's agreement over the phone, somewhat reluctantly as I understand.

The word still didn't go down to his staff, and we were really just about to get on the plane to go to Perth and still didn't have approval of this issue. Mr. Bohlen had to call Mr. Bolton a second time and said, "Please tell your staff. You told me it's okay. Please tell your staff." Finally we were able to go to Perth and were able to approve the adoption of Spanish as a working language. A small thing but it does show you how sometimes you can be almost halted in your efforts.

Q: It shows. What you're doing is the chipping away at various obstacles and all this. It's an awful lot of work that goes on in international affairs. Small little items can turn out to be major problems.

CECIL: I'll give you another example of what I'll call narrow-minded State Department administration, the rigid application of rules and regulations. I suppose it's all justified, but it irritated me at the time.

I learned that there's a wonderful train that crossed Australia from Sydney to Perth. I forget now, I think it's called the Indo-Pacific Express or something like that. It's a train that leaves Sydney I think every day in the late afternoon, and it takes 68 hours, just under three days to get to Perth. I said to myself this is going to be my only chance to see something of Australia. I know that's flat desert out there, most of it, but I like that kind of country anyway. I went to the travel office and asked if they could get me a train reservation after I arrived at Sydney. They said, "Sure, and in fact it even costs less than an airplane from Sydney to Perth, so it won't even cost you any money. We can arrange the ticket but of course you'll have to take annual leave for three days because you could fly there in five hours from Sydney, but it you choose to go by train, the State Department doesn't consider that work." I said okay, so I went on the train.

My justification was not only did I want to see the land, the country, and have the experience, but I said it will also give me three days to adjust to the time zone changes. If I'm supposed to be leading a delegation of 12 people, I don't want to be falling asleep in the middle of the meetings, so I thought that would be a good transition into the Perth time zone. Perth, you know, is the Foreign Service post farthest from Washington, D.C. It's 12 time zones away, halfway around the world. I got my train ticket. I paid three days annual leave, and I had a wonderful train ride across Australia to Perth and some very, very interesting meetings in Perth.

Q: Why was it in Perth?

CECIL: It's like all these other international meetings. The countries volunteer to host, and I suppose from time to time it doesn't have to be in the capital, so I guess the government of Australia wanted to give some economic stimulus to Perth by having thousands of people attend this meeting, and it went on for about 10 days-an interesting experience in multilateral diplomacy.

So these four years were very broadening. They exposed me for the first time to countries in South America and elsewhere where I had never had any exposure to in my career. I actually got to go to Chile for a second time, to Santiago, for a meeting for the Organization of American States when Deputy Secretary Larry Eagleburger was leading our delegation to the OES meeting. I forget when that was. I don't seem to have written the date down here, but '91 or '92 probably. He wanted an environmental person in his delegation because there were some environmental issues that might come up, so I actually got to go to Santiago twice.

In October of '91 I decided I should enroll in early morning Spanish classes here at FSI. I was doing so much with Latin America, I thought I really would like to learn the language, and this was a wonderful opportunity. I also began to think I might actually have an opportunity to bid on a DCM position in some Latin American country. Bolivia was the one that particularly attracted me. So from October on I came over to FSI every morning, five days a week and did an hour of Spanish. As it happened, I did not get a DCMship in Latin America. The bureau was nice to me. The Deputy Assistant Secretary who was interviewing candidates did interview me, but in the end it was clear that someone with previous years of service in the region and absolute fluency in Spanish would obviously have the inside track, and there were a lot of officers who met those criteria.

What did happen is that sometime in early '92 I got a call one day from Ambassador Hume Horan who asked me if I would like to be his DCM in Abidjan, Ivory Coast or Cote d'Ivoire. Since I had worked for Ambassador Horan in Jeddah in the early '70s, I knew him well. I greatly respected him as probably the best Arabist in our service. The opportunity to work for him was certainly not one I would have wanted to pass up. I quickly-immediately-just about... I probably asked my wife that night, but I'm sure the next day I told him of course.

Starting in early '92 we began to focus on going to West Africa in the summer of '92.

Q: You were in Abidjan from when to when?

CECIL: That was '92 to '95. That's a subject for another session. If we could wrap up the OES years, I would say from a career point of view it was a wonderful experience. It did everything really that I had hoped it would do. It gave me exposure to new subject matter. It gave me exposure to a new part of the world. It was a wonderful introduction to the world of multilateral diplomacy and gave me a lot of experience here in Washington in interagency relationships. It really helped fill out my career background.

I think the most satisfying part of the whole thing was working on the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative. The opportunity to take a new law just passed by the Congress authorizing a presidential initiative-an initiative linking debt with environmental preservation and protection. To take that Congressional initiative and actually turn it into three bilateral agreements and see something come to the point of being ready implement was very satisfying. I didn't stay around long enough to see the action, and I didn't stay long enough for the other negotiations that followed. I know there were other bilateral agreements concluded after I left OES using the same model that we developed. I don't know how many. Anyway, that was a great experience.

Q: At the time, do you know who came up with the idea? It's a great idea.

CECIL: Again, dept for nature swaps were as far as I know a creation of the NGO community. There were a lot of creative thinkers in the NGO community. If I had my old calling cards here, I could probably name one or two people that I know were really actively engaged in promoting it.

Q: I would think that you would find a very mixed bag of the NGO community. There were ones who I called "realists" who understood the political world and all, and then ones that were idealists who would be very difficult for somebody in a bureaucracy to deal with. Did you find it fell out that way or not?

CECIL: When you talk like that, what you bring to mind are organizations like Greenpeace that have the reputation for really being on the fringe out there. They'll endanger themselves to get press attention or to stop things from happening. I'll just have to say those were not the kind pf people we had to deal with. How many can I remember today? Of course we dealt with the Nature Conservancy. We dealt with the World Wildlife Fund. The spin off from the Nature Conservancy... What were they called? Mittermeyer was his name. It slips my mind now. National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council. Really wonderful mainline, important NGOs. I suppose they had idealists inside, and I'm sure that the administration regarded them as a kind of nuisance from time to time because of the prodding that they did to move things forward. But all of my experiences were that these were very serious people committed to doing positive things.

Q: Of course the people who were the prodders and who seemed a little bit beyond the fringe often represent the future. They help blaze the way often.

CECIL: Yes. Looking to the next time we meet, I will say I was planting some seeds during this four year period for my future. Starting in 1989, I started taking photography courses at Northern Virginia Community College. Photography had always been my hobby and, of course, I became 50 in 1990 so I could begin to think about retirement. That's a nice option to have. If you ever get a terrible assignment you don't want to do, well you can retire. Of course, you can always resign, too. In any case I wasn't seriously thinking of retirement back then. I had two kids either in college or about to go and a third one a few years behind, so for financial reasons I still needed the security of that steady income.

Nevertheless, I had always wanted to become a more accomplished photographer and to know about the technical side, so from '89 to '92 I took seven courses at NOVA in various aspects of photography. Those were all at night school. As we'll see when we finally get to the end of this lengthy story, I am trying to make photography my second career in retirement. The seeds for that were planted back during these OES years. I suppose one thing that shows is at least once or twice a week I was able to leave the office at a reasonable hour and get to an evening class that would usually start at seven. Sometimes if you're working in a geographic bureau, it's harder to get out in time to do anything else. The geographic bureaus can be tremendously demanding. OES was demanding enough. And sometimes especially as you prepared to go to some big international conference, there was a lot of work in the final days of preparation, but on the whole I don't think any of the demands were unreasonable. It was a wonderful work experience.

Q: Okay, then we'll pick this up next time in 1992 when you were off to Abidjan as a DCM to Hume Horan. We'll pick it up then.

Cote d'Ivoire/Ivory Coast

Q: Today is the 18th of June 2008. This is in 1992 when you're off to Abidjan, Ivory Coast as the deputy to Hume Horan. Is that right?

CECIL: Right. My wife and I arrived in Abidjan about four weeks ahead of Ambassador and Mrs. Horan. I would like to put the situation in context. There are a couple of points that maybe are worth commenting on. First, as far as the country was concerned, of course it was still under the presidency of Felix Houphouet-Boigny. He was about 90 years old at that point, one of the fathers of African independence.

Hume Horan, in fact, was the last ambassador from any country to present credentials to Houphouet-Boigny. When Ambassador Horan did present his credentials, there were seven ambassadors that day. They had I think delayed the ceremony a little bit for the arrival of the American ambassador because there were six others already waiting. Hume Horan being the newest arrival was the last to present. There was never another credentials ceremony with Houphouet-Boigny. Houphouet died in the following year, but there was a period of many months when he was ill and some of that time in Paris, so he never did receive credentials again.

Ivory Coast, or as the Ivoirians insisted on calling it, Cote d'Ivoire, had officially changed the name with United Nations to Cote d'Ivoire, so there was not supposed to be any Ivory Coast anymore although, of course, in the English speaking world it is still common to call it that. Houphouet had believed that it was foolish to try to emulate the Western developed countries by trying to build an industrial base in the country, a manufacturing base. He felt that the nation's comparative advantage, if you will (I don't know if he thought in terms of that economic concept), was in agriculture. He believed that the prosperity of the country should be built on agri-business and that's what they did focus their efforts on.

It was a country of vast agricultural exports. Coffee and cacao were the number one and two exports, but there were large plantations of bananas, and of pineapples. There were rubber plantations. In the north they grew cotton. It was a drier climate there, not so tropical, more a Sahelian climate. There was limited mineral wealth, but there was some gold in the east over near the border with Ghana, and they did allow some Western companies to come in and mine the gold. There were modest diamond deposits in the north-central part of the country around a place called Tortilla which I was told actually took its name from Steinbeck's novel Tortilla Flats. But the mineral wealth of the country was not the focus of the government's attention. It was the agricultural potential that the prosperity was based on.

Houphouet believed that Cote d'Ivoire should be what he called "un pais d'accueil", a country of welcome, using the French term. By that he meant it was open to migrant labor from all West African neighboring countries who wanted to come. In fact, it was many of the most difficult back-breaking manual labor jobs that were performed by Burkinabe from Burkina Faso, by Malians or by Nigeriens who came seeking work in Cote d'Ivoire. Houphouet even allowed them to vote in Ivorian elections. They didn't even have to be citizens to vote in Ivorian elections. One just had to establish residency.

There was a kind of second-class status or attitude toward these foreigners who came. Houphouet of course was Roman Catholic, and many of his ministers were Catholic or at least Christian. I would say that the southern Christians controlled the majority of the government and the economic influence in the country. The northerners who tended to be Muslim were less favored and in later years after Houphouet's death, of course, this did eventually result in a rebellion, a civil war, which lasted quite a few years before, maybe... Hopefully it's over now.

The country's been calm I think the last couple of years. This reflected part of that great fissure that we see across Africa from Sudan starting maybe in Darfur all the way over to Senegal where Islam coming down from the north and westward from the Arabian peninsula spreads across that area of the Sahel, and the southernmost areas tend to be Christian. The northern areas tend to be Muslim.

I've always felt that Sudan, for instance, would inevitably separate into two countries because of the great religious and cultural differences between the north and the south. There was nothing that stark in Cote d'Ivoire, but nevertheless there were the seeds of strife and civil unrest there. After Houphouet died in December of 1993 I think that was, the government under his successor Henri Konan-Bedie began to roll back the policies that welcomed the immigrants. Then when the civil war eventually broke out and the economy deteriorated, the jobs disappeared, and the foreigners were encouraged or pushed to go back to their home countries.

Q: You were saying that Houphouet-Boigny had opted for agro-business. Who was running these plantations? These things need quite a bit of management and infrastructure to produce commodities that are acceptable externally.

CECIL: In most cases that I know of the organizations were under French management. I failed to mention tropical timber, another very important export for Cote d'Ivoire. I visited a saw mill once. It was very much under French management, with African labor. I visited a banana plantation where it was very much the same situation: French management and African labor.

Q: Was there any effort to... I'm familiar with Saudi Arabia where the gradualSaudi-ization of the oil business occurred. Was there an effort on the part of the government when you were there to bring Cote d'Ivorians into management?

CECIL: You would think that there would have to be some kind of a program or an effort, but I have to say that I don't recall it being an issue. I don't recall pressure on these expatriate companies to Ivorianize their management. Perhaps there was some, but it certainly wasn't a major issue like several other countries I've been in.

The French community in Cote d'Ivoire was very large. I hesitate to say a number now for fear that my memory will lead me astray, but let's say either 25,000 or 50,000, I can't remember which, but it was quite sizeable. There was of course a French military base in Abidjan with a small French force whose real purpose was to protect the regime in power.

Q: How would you characterize the Ivoirians because some of the countries in that area, their people are renowned as good bureaucrats or good workers of one sort, or not so good or something like that? What was the impression from our embassy at the time?

CECIL: The opinion leaders and the government officials and the business leaders, were mostly French-educated. We often talked of them and others talked of them as being more French than the French. They loved French culture; they loved all the comforts of the good life. It was common to go to an Ivorian home for a diplomatic function and champagne would be the first thing served. As you walk in the door you're offered a glass of champagne. It was a very high standard of living that the wealthy Ivoirians enjoyed. They prided themselves on their French educations. In many ways you might say it was a caricature of French culture.

Q: Where was the money coming from to make this group, the wealthy Ivoirians wealthy?

CECIL: That's a good question. I'm not sure I have a good answer for you. There certainly were many business arrangements between expatriate investors and Ivoirians. The government and the society was basically a patronage society so that people used their position for their own benefit and to benefit their families and their friends. There were contracts signed, and I think the government was probably as guilty of corruption as any other government in that part of the world might be expected to be.

Abidjan in those days, we're talking early '90s now, '92 to '95 was my period, was very much a center for business operations throughout West Africa. Lots of expatriate companies, European and some American, would make their regional headquarters in Abidjan. Also the West African Development Bank had their headquarters there. There were lots of regional offices in Abidjan, so the economy was benefiting from all of this expatriate money. Lots of houses rented. Real estate was a very profitable undertaking for Ivoirians. They would build houses and rent them to expatriates.

Q: I take it in a way Abidjan had to a certain extent replaced Dakar as the center of the Francophone Africa.

CECIL: Maybe. I don't know Dakar, so I can't compare, but I don't know whether Dakar suffered. Maybe it wasn't a zero sum game, but certainly Abidjan prospered from all of this foreign money. The Peace Corps volunteers in Cote d'Ivoire had a wonderful saying about Abidjan. There were only a handful of volunteers assigned to Abidjan in teaching positions, and by handful I'm guessing three or four or five at most. All the rest, another hundred or so, were in villages up-country doing various things. The volunteers had this little saying. "The nicest thing about Abidjan is it's so close to Africa." They meant by that, of course, that when they came to Abidjan it was really like going to Europe. It was a totally different standard and style of living than the rest of the country enjoyed.

Q: What was the world of the Peace Corps like, not just necessarily the Peace Corps, but the village world? How was all this translated out of the villages?

CECIL: It was probably as you would expect to find it. The villages were African villages that usually did not have electricity. If they were close to a main paved highway, they might have electricity, but that's only a small part of the country. Once you get very far from those paved highways where the electric lines would run, then you're really into a more, I have to say, almost primitive standard of living. Probably not as low a standard of living as one would find in Niger where, of course, I spent three years later in the '90s and in Niger as ambassador I had many opportunities to travel around Niger and visit many, many Peace Corps volunteers which was a major focus of my interest and my activity. In Cote d'Ivoire I didn't have quite as much opportunity to travel although I did travel as much as I could. I did go to a number of volunteers living in villages. Their life was very basic. Their water would come from wells, and their diet was a certainly better diet in Cote d'Ivoire than in Niger because of the ready availability of tropical fruits and a fair supply of vegetables, but nevertheless a pretty basic standard of living in those villages.

There's another point to make under the heading of putting things in context. I would like to say something about the importance of Abidjan to the U.S. government and the embassy. We were what I would call a medium-sized embassy because of the regional nature of Abidjan. We had many U.S. government agencies with offices and representatives in Abidjan whose jobs carried them throughout West Africa. We had 11 U.S. government agencies in Abidjan. In fact, we often said there were 13 because there were three totally different and separate Defense Department offices in Abidjan.

Of course we had the defense attachï¿½ in the embassy. That was a three-officer office. We had all three services represented: air, naval, and army. They were accredited to a few of the other countries in the area. They had a small airplane, a C-12 I think it was, that allowed them to fly around the area. Then of course we had our Marine security guard detachment whose job was just to protect the embassy under the command of a gunnery sergeant.

Then there was another Marine office which really was separate from the Marine security guard detachment and tried not to interfere in the gunnery sergeant's work. That was what we called Company G, and they were a regional Marine office whose job was to travel throughout West Africa and inspect the Marine security guard detachments at all of our embassies and to make sure that they were being properly run and that there were no problems requiring their attention.

Q: Let's put it in perspective. During this period and other periods there had been calls for Marines to come in with some forces.... I'm thinking Liberia, Sierra Leone, and maybe somewhere else. I'm sure the Marines were always looking for a real problem.

CECIL: Yes, but that would not have been the job of Company G. Their job was just to focus on the management of the embassy Marine security guard detachments. Evacuations would have been the concern of EUCOM in Stuttgart in Europe if that was necessary, and I guess it was a couple of times, but that's where that would have been handled, really from out of Europe.

We did have an evacuation of American citizens from Liberia shortly after I arrived in Abidjan sometime in the fall of '92. I'd say September or October. There was a large evacuation of Americans through Abidjan. They flew from Monrovia to Abidjan, and then we helped them move onward from there.

To go back to the importance of Abidjan to us, I said we had 11, or if you count three DOD components separately, we had 13 U.S. government agencies. That resulted in 195 direct-hire American employees. Direct hire or contract. There were some AID contract employees in that number, so 195 Americans. That's a medium-size embassy, I guess, at least in those times.

Just to be specific, let me tell you the agencies were the State Department. AID had a large regional office called the REDSO which I think stood for Regional Economic Development Support Office. There was no bilateral AID program with Cote d'Ivoire. They were too prosperous to qualify, but there were programs in most of the other West African countries, and they were supported out of Abidjan with specialists since not every mission would need, let's say, a hydrologist or an agricultural economist, so there would be such people in Abidjan, and they would then travel to the other AID missions when needed.

Then we had USIS. We had FBIS, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. They had a facility there to listen to radio broadcasts from all the neighboring countries and transcribe them and get them out to government officials and the interested public and the academic communities.

Q: This was not...

CECIL: Clandestine. No.

Q: This was completely open which had been going for years. A very important element of American press ___.

CECIL: One of their facilities was there in Abidjan to cover West Africa. Foreign Commercial Service had an office there with two foreign commercial service officers. Peace Corps, of course, as I mentioned earlier. Treasury Department had a representative not actually in the embassy but assigned to the West African Development Bank.

Q: West African Development Bank.

CECIL: There were actually two Americans in the bank. One was the U.S. representative to the bank, a person who did not report through the U.S. ambassador or through the U.S. embassy; rather if she reported to anyone it would have been to the Treasury department. I don't recall at this time what her formal reporting responsibility was, but she was the U.S. representative on the bank. That was a lady named Alice Dear during my time. She had an assistant, a deputy, from the Treasury department who worked for her and with her. Their offices were in the bank. They did not have offices in the embassy, and they did not participate in country team meetings but nevertheless there was a tenuous relationship there. They had certain access to embassy support, the health unit, for instance. I suppose they had access to the commissary, that sort of thing. So anyway, Treasury.

Foreign Agricultural Service had an attachï¿½ there for West Africa. The Voice of America had a correspondent based in Abidjan who traveled a lot, and then the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta had a large program in Abidjan for conducting research on AIDS and HIV. In those days they were gathering data. They were studying the prevalence of HIV and AIDS in Cote d'Ivoire, and they did conduct some trials of treatment regimes. I don't know really anything about the medical side of that, but it was all done in cooperation with Ivorian doctors and with the Ivorian ministry of health. There was nothing secret or that we didn't share with Ivoirians on that. It was quite a mixture of U.S. government agencies. It made country team an interesting place and lots of good discussions. A good management job for a DCM, I would say.

Q: Did you have any particular problems with any of the outfits getting off the range?

CECIL: I don't think so. No, I don't think of anything that comes to mind. We had one basic and very important rule that Ambassador Horan laid down early on in his time, and it was never a problem as far as I could recall. Ambassador Horan was not one to insist that he was the only spokesperson for the U.S. government in Abidjan. He knew that some of these other agencies had legitimate reasons to have meetings with Ivorian officials, including ministers.

It was not unusual if the foreign agricultural attachï¿½, for instance, would meet with the Ivorian minister of agriculture or maybe even the minister of commerce because of course we're trying to promote sales of American products. It was quite possible that the head of the Center for Disease Control would meet with the minister of health, so Ambassador Horan didn't try to say, "I want to be the spokesperson on those meetings." His rule was "if you are planning a meeting with a minister, we want to know in advance. (We the front office.) In fact, we hope there will always be time for it to be mentioned at country team so that every member of the country team knows what's coming, and if there is some other relationship with that ministry or that minister that you need to know about-either pitfalls to avoid or favors you can do for us by even such a simple thing as delivering something to the minister's office, or just adding to your talking points something else that another component of the embassy is interested in. We want to know about that meeting in advance."

I think people honored that. I wouldn't say that it was common that other members of the country team met with ministers, but it was certainly not an unusual occurrence, and we didn't worry about it. We had full confidence in the directors of the various agencies. There was just no problem that I can recall of their failing to share information with us.

That brings to mind an interesting little anecdote. We had a two-person economic section. The more senior person I can't remember if he had the rank of counselor or not, but he was probably an 01, I guess. Then we had during my time a first-tour officer, but she was a mid-level entry. We had the mid-level entry program back then, so this was a lady probably in her mid-30s, I guess, who had considerable experience in the private sector before joining the Foreign Service, also a black American and very, very competent, and also extremely good in her relationships with Ivorian counterparts.

She was there before the arrival of the econ counselor. I'll call him the counselor although I'm a little unsure if he had the title. One day after he had been there three or four weeks, the counselor came into my office. I won't use any names, but let's just call the younger officer Mary. The older officer came in and said, "Chuck, Mary's off the reservation. We've got to reel her back in." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "She just received a call from a minister." I forget which minister it was, but probably either commerce or one of the economically-oriented ministries. "She just received a call from a minister!" I said, "Oh, okay. What's the problem there? Tell me about that." "Well, she's on her first tour. She might say something that's not policy. She might cause a misunderstanding between our governments. She just doesn't have the experience to speak for the embassy or for the government."

I said, "Well, I have a different vantage point maybe on that. I think it's absolutely fantastic if the minister picked up his phone and called the U.S. embassy to ask for something. I presume it's not a visa!" (We had ways to handle that, too.) I said, "I think that's very good that she has that kind of access and that the minister has that apparent confidence in her knowledge and her ability to answer his questions. As for whether she might misspeak, I wouldn't worry about that. I don't' think anyone is going to mistake Mary for the ambassador, so if she should perhaps stray or say something that's not 100% U.S. policy, I think it'll be taken at the level it comes from. If the minister really wants an official statement of U.S. policy on something, I think he'll call the ambassador. That doesn't worry me, and I think that's a real asset. We want to encourage that kind of access and contact."

The Econ Officer was not too happy with my opinion and as it turned out in later discussions I think maybe he thought that his job was going to be more of a managerial job that he was coming to rather than a reporting job because on another occasion I remember he said he really wanted to manage the economic function of the economic office. I said, "There's only two of you. You may have to do a little reporting."

CECIL: I'm trying to represent a managerial attitude that we had in the front office, Hume and myself.

There are a couple of other things I could say about the ambassador and the role of the DCM. I've always thought that there were two theories of DCM selection. I called them in my own mind the "alter ego theory", and the "complementarity theory," for lack of a better word for it. Under the alter ego theory the ambassador tries to find somebody who's as close to being like him as he can be. The advantage of that is that when the ambassador is away, the DCM acting as chargï¿½ is not likely to create any surprises by making decisions that the ambassador might not agree with. In other words, under the alter ego theory the two people think pretty much alike and probably have more or less similar experiences. That was certainly the theory that Hume Horan followed in asking me to be his DCM. We were both Arabists. Why there should be two Arabists in West Africa at the same time I'm not sure, but I think we did develop a new dimension to embassy reporting there. We can talk about that again in a minute. To stick to my point, we were both political officers. We had served together in Saudi Arabia in the '70s, and I guess that's why he asked me to come to Cote d'Ivoire. He knew me, knew my work.

The other theory of DCM selection is what I called the "complementarity theory" where the ambassador looks for somebody who has experience and knowledge that's quite different from his own. I certainly followed that theory when I was looking for a DCM for Niger a few years later. Since I was a political officer I wanted an economic officer to be my DCM because I knew that development issues were important in Niger, economic issues extremely important, and I was not as strong in that area. I know among the list of candidates I was given by the Director General, there was at least one consular officer. In making my selection I had to give a reason for my preference, and explain why others were not acceptable. My response to that was that consular issues are not a major element in our relationship with Niger. Economic issues are. But I'm getting ahead of my assignment history here.

Hume followed the alter ego theory. I'm very glad that he did because working for Hume Horan was its own reward just like virtue is its own reward, I guess. Hume was a fantastic example of an incredible mind somewhat like Tom Pickering's but maybe even more creative and inventive. Life was a constant graduate seminar working for Hume Horan.

He was as it turned out away from the post quite a bit. For one period of five months I was chargï¿½. He was called back to Washington to participate on promotion panels, another time to serve on the Bremer committee studying Department management issues, and he also had a serious illness. There were several lengthy absences. I'm glad to say Washington had enough confidence to let me be the chargï¿½, and I think things pretty much went along as they had been because he and I did tend to think alike. There were no surprises waiting for him when he got back to post.

Q: What about our embassy relationship with the French?

CECIL: What to say about that? Hume did meet with the French ambassador periodically. Not frequently but from time to time. That was one case where I rarely accompanied him. Hume was a great believer that the DCM should know everything that the ambassador knew so that the DCM could instantly pick up the reins and carry on in the face of any unexpected event.

When Hume would call on an Ivorian minister I was almost always with him, but in the case of the French ambassador I probably only went once in three years. I guess that's a case where Hume thought, and perhaps it was some signal that the French ambassador conveyed, I don't know, but I guess he really wanted to focus on building a close personal relationship more than an institutional one.

Our relationship was not one where we shared information and cooperated to achieve mutual objectives. I think the French saw us very much as their competitor there. If American companies made inroads into Cote d'Ivoire it was at the expense of the French. I think that was their attitude. If our political influence in the area grew that was at the expense of the French. France of course always saw itself as the spokesperson, in some ways the patron, of the former French colonies in the UN and sometimes in other international organizations, and they didn't want us getting any credit for supporting, defending, Francophone African interests. The French attitude toward us was rather similar to the British attitude toward us in Oman, except that we shared more with the Brits in Oman.

Q: Did we ever find ourselves while you were there at cross purposes with the French?

CECIL: I don't have an example to cite. I don't know that we did other than the general competition for economic access. We were trying to promote American business growth and access and investment, but I'm not aware that we ever really came to blows over anything.

Q: The French are renowned for giving governmental support of one kind or another in promoting industry, French commerce and such. Did you find yourself running up against that?

CECIL: You know, I'll bet if you had our foreign commercial officer here, she'd be able to give you a lot examples. I think I have to just say they didn't rise to our level, not that I'm aware of. I don't recall myself being involved in any strong representations to the Ivorian government. Perhaps Hume did some that have slipped my mind now, but I'm thinking one of the common areas where we sometimes run up against each other is in aircraft sales. I have to say I don't recall any efforts to sell American aircraft to the Ivorian national airline. If there were that would be a case where French influence would take the upper hand.

Q: Oh, yes! Did you feel at all the influence of the French government in Paris and maybe even the Mitterrand son who had this French policy at the time. Was this an element that we have served or getting reports from Paris?

CECIL: Now that you mention it, it rings a bell that Mitterrand's son was perhaps involved in business deals, but I'm afraid I can't really provide anything for the record. I don't have any memory of good examples that I'd want to cite.

I could say one or two other things about my job as DCM during that time. I was surprised that I spent so much time on personnel issues. I guess it's expected that the DCM's job is to manage the mission so the ambassador doesn't have to worry about it, but it certainly was a major component of my work. On one occasion I was placed almost in the role of a marriage counselor, I remember. Both members of a troubled couple came to me separately, neither knowing that the other had come, wanting to share their problems with me and looking for advice. It was not a role I had thought I would ever see myself in. They didn't cover that in the DCM's course.

There were other internal problems in the mission mostly of a supervisor/subordinate type of relationship. I mentioned earlier the Foreign Commercial Service office. We had an extremely capable, energetic, and talented first-tour officer working for an older, more experienced Foreign Commercial Service officer. In fact, we had two who would fit that category, two older, more experienced supervisors neither of whom were as energetic or capable as the young officer. That created some significant difficulties that I had to get into in both cases. Both of the older officers were not doing a good job of supervising the younger, and I didn't relish getting into that. In fact, in the first case I had to because the older officer left at the end of her assignment placing the performance report of the younger officer on her desk the day the older officer went to the airport with no counseling, no opportunity to discuss. It was an example of the kind of a personnel issue that sometimes DCMs have to ___.

Q: How would you deal with something like that?

CECIL: Every case, I guess, has its own traits. As Tolstoy said, "Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In the specific case I mentioned I wound up writing a reviewing statement for the performance report, a very long one for the Foreign Commercial Service promotion panels explaining that it had never been foreseen that I would be writing such a statement but under the circumstances there didn't seem to be any choice. In fact, I got a letter back from the Director General, I guess she was called, of the Foreign Commercial Service thanking me for the statement that I wrote which helped their panels put the issue into perspective. It may very well have, I don't know if "saved the career" of the younger officer is an overstatement, but the younger officer would certainly have suffered and not have gone on to other good jobs, and she's had a very, very fine and distinguished career in the Foreign Commercial Service in the many years after. You just have to take each one carefully and ask questions and listen. I think that's the important thing. Be a good listener and try not to rush to judgment in any case.

In another case I recall being an advocate for the officer with the Department, which was an example of short-sightedness on the part of the Department. We had a refugee affairs officer on our staff. She was part of the political section. She traveled a lot throughout West Africa dealing with refugee issues. A Foreign Service Officer, she wanted to go back to school to get her PhD. She had done lots of coursework, but she needed to do some final year of coursework, and she needed to do her dissertation. She asked the department for two years of leave without pay. The department denied it to her. They said, "Nope. Give you a year." No promises on anything beyond that. It's very unlikely that we could approve a second year.

They forced the officer basically to choose between her Foreign Service career and her desire for a PhD in her field, so she left the Service. That was such a short-sighted decision, and even though I, and I'm not sure now whether I wrote this myself and signed it or whether it was something I wrote for the ambassador, but we tried to make the Director General see the short-sighted nature of this position, yet we failed, so the officer left the service, and we lost the services of a good reporting officer.

I spent a lot of time on personnel issues. I did travel around Cote d'Ivoire as I said earlier, as much as I could. I always have believed that you need not only to get out of the office but out of the capital as well. You have to get out into the countryside. I went to places like the Tai National Forest which is a biodiversity center of concern to the environmental community. That was an interesting site to visit. There's a small research station there staffed, I believe at the time, by Swiss researchers.

I went to places like San Pedro in the west near the Liberian border. It's Cote d'Ivoire's second port, and I wanted to have a look. I went to the northwest up along the western side of the country up to Odiennï¿½ in the far northwest. There was a program there to eradicate river blindness in West Africa. That was one of their two centers. They had helicopters that would fly along little streams and small rivers where the fly lives that carries the river blindness parasite, and they spray to eliminate that.

I went to those diamond mines in the center, in Tortilla, that I mentioned earlier. I went there twice actually to try to learn about how the diamond extraction process went and who were the buyers. I found an Israeli living in Tortilla buying the diamonds that the workers would find as they... Basically it's like panning for gold. They go down into the ground in these deep shafts that they dig with virtually no protection, and they send buckets of earth up to the top which are then carried to small streams and sifted by literally hundreds of laborers sifting in the water and hope to find a few little diamonds. And they do find them.

I visited the gold mines over near the Ghanaian border. I visited banana plantations. I went to all the agricultural operations that I could visit. If there were Peace Corps volunteers in the area, I would try to include them in my visits. Peace Corps management in Cote d'Ivoire did not share the stand-offish attitudes of the PC Director in Mali, but it was a dozen years later. I encouraged everyone else in the embassy to get out and do the same. We had a pretty good travel program. Cote d'Ivoire had a good road system. The basic elements were there. It wasn't too difficult to travel.

Q: What was you impression of the government, of various personnel...?

CECIL: Lots of petty corruption and maybe even larger corruption in cases where opportunities were there. The ministers and others probably took advantage of their situation. Compared to other West African countries, Cote d'Ivoire was rather prosperous. One would have to say so, so there was a lot of money to be passed around. I knew an Ivorian active in the only Ivorian environmental organization. He was quite frustrated at the difficulty of protecting things like the tropical forest resources. He said, "It's cronyism. Important ministers and important businessmen are getting contracts to chop down the timber and export it, and nobody's thinking about the future timber, and nobody's planting." There was that. The police were constantly shaking down Ivorian motorists for petty or fabricated violations. You have a tail light out or your paperwork isn't quite in order. The police were notorious for trying to get money from motorists. We were pretty much immune because of our diplomatic license plates, but our FSNs in the embassy were not, and the average Ivorian citizen was victimized, so the police were not looked upon very favorably.

There were certainly problems in customs organization and in the port. Lots of private sector people had to pay bribes or they had to have arrangements. They had to have customs clearers who would get their stuff through the ports,. And that was just a very thin veil over the payment of bribes to get services that you would expect that the government is supposed to perform without having to pay them.

The country was in an early stage of political development. There was only one political party allowed until 1990 and that was Houphouet's party, RDCI it was called. The Rassemblement Democratique de la Cote d'Ivoire. That would be what, Democratic Assembly (or Rally) of Cote d'Ivoire, I guess we would translate it.

In 1990 Houphouet allowed the creation of other political parties. There was to be a parliamentary election in 1995. There were maybe as many as 40 parties that sprang up to try to participate in those 1995 elections. There was what you could call signs of incipient unrest.

In March of 1993 there was a small mutiny by what we called the republican guard. That was the small military force whose job was to protect the president. They mutinied and took over the presidential palace for a couple of days wanting either higher pay or back pay, I can't remember now. I think they were usually paid on time. That was crucial. If you want to protect the presidency, you pay them on time. Not everybody else was paid on time, but I think they were, so they wanted higher salaries. That was dealt with, but that was a sign of future problems.

When Houphouet died in December of 1993 he was in Paris. He had prostate cancer and I guess died from the effects of that or maybe complications from that. Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara had filled the role actually of acting president for several months while Houphouet was in Paris getting treatment. When Houphouet-Boigny died, Ouattara seemed to entertain the thought that he could become the president, and yet under the constitution, and if I can recall it correctly, the national assembly was supposed to choose the next president.

Henri Konan-Bedie was president of the national assembly and was considered to be the likely successor of Houphouet, the favored successor, in fact. Bedie had a reputation for being corrupt. You hear this term in many countries, "Mister 10 percent." It was certainly used in regard to Bedie. I don't know the truth of it, but certainly he was well off and probably did. I think he had been minister of the treasury or economy or something earlier in his time. Anyway, he was the legitimate successor.

There was a standoff of a few days in which Ouattara seemed to be making a play for power. In fact Ambassador Horan sent me to see Bedie with a private message from us. Bedie was in Yamoussoukro where... That was Houphouet -Boigny's hometown, and he had a kind of presidential palace compound there. Bedie was there. Hume Horan sent me to take a short message to Bedie, and the defense attachï¿½'s aircraft was used for that and flew me up to Yamoussoukro which was maybe an hour or hour and a half north of Abidjan. Our message was basically, "The U.S. government recognizes the legitimacy of your claim to the presidency, and we will not be supporting Alassane Ouattara in his effort to claim the post."

Q: Do you have any idea whether there was any cooperation with the French on something like this?

CECIL: It's certainly a good question.. I don't recall any consultations with the French on that. I think the consultations were with Washington, and I think Washington said we should be clear that... You see, there was some concern that we might have favored Ouattara because he was well known to us, we worked well with him, he had been many years in Washington working at the IMF. He was an economist of course. He had been the head of the Africa division of the IMF in the '80s. Houphouet made him his prime minister round about 1990 or so. As I say, all those months when Houphouet was in Paris we dealt with Ouattara basically as a kind of acting head of state. We certainly had a good working relationship with Ouattara, and we had much more contact with Ouattara than we did with Bedie.

We didn't have much business with Bedie as head of the national assembly. But when it came down to questions of stability and legitimacy and the constitution we did side with the constitution on that issue. After a few days I think Ouattara got the message, saw the handwriting on the wall. I don't know if he resigned the prime ministership or if Bedie relieved him of it, in any case that challenge was passed and Ouattara as I recall left the country for Paris. He's remained active in Ivorian politics.

He challenged Bedie in, I guess it was the '95 election, but Bedie got the national assembly to change the electoral code to require that any candidate for the presidency be born of two Ivorian parents and to be born in Cote d'Ivoire. The Bedie's people raised questions about whether Ouattara could meet those criteria. There was a dispute over where Ouattara had been born. His opponents claimed he had been born in Burkina Faso, and they claimed that one of his parents, I forget which one, was Burkinabe, but Ouattara claimed that no, indeed he had been born in Cote d'Ivoire and that both of his parents were Ivorian.

When Ouattara had been working at IMF, I think it was, he had had a Burkinabe passport, we were told. At some time in his earlier life he had had a Burkinabe passport. I may be wrong on the exact timing of that. It could have been that when he went to university he was on a Burkinabe passport. The point was that at some point in his past he had had a Burkinabe passport and his opponents in Cote d'Ivoire seized on that to cast doubt on his Ivorian citizenship, so he was basically disqualified from running in '95. I think much the same thing happened later in 2000, but I wasn't following Ivorian politics so closely then. I do know now though that they're going to have an election. I think it's scheduled for November of this year, and my understanding is that Ouattara will be a candidate as will Bedie against Laurent Gbagbo who became president after Bedie was ousted in a coup.

That's a long history and outside of my three years. I will say that that was one of the divisions of labor during our time there. Laurent Gbagbo was the leader of the opposition once Houphouet allowed parties to form. Hume Horan's division of labor there was that Hume would deal with the president and the prime minister in most cases but not with the opposition, and I would deal with the opposition as DCM. I and our political officer would keep contact with Gbagbo from time to time. I guess there's nothing special to be said there. That's just how we divided up the work.

When Houphouet died there was of course a massive funeral in Yamoussoukro at the basilica that he had had built during his time.

Q: How did we feel about that basilica? From what I understand it's St. Peter's a little bit bigger or something.

CECIL: The dome I think is taller than St. Peter's. I think that's it. It's an incredible facility to find there in this small African town. There's a story. Pope John Paul came for the, I guess it was probably the consecration of the basilica. He made two visits to Cote d'Ivoire during his papacy which is evidence of Felix Houphouet-Boigny's closeness to the catholic church and his cultivation of his church as part of the evidence of his own legitimacy.

There's a story which I read at the time. I guess it's true, but I can't vouch for it personally. Some reporter said to President Houphouet-Boigny, "Mr. President, your country has many needs for health care and education and improvements in its infrastructure. How could you justify spending government money on this basilica?" The president said, "We didn't spend any government money on it. I paid for it all myself."

Houphouet had wanted the church to take over responsibility for it, and Pope John Paul I'm told insisted that the church would only do so once an endowment fund was established to ensure the future maintenance costs would be covered. Houphouet was supposed to have established such a fund. I don't know any of the details of it. I don't know if it's still today covering the maintenance costs or not. They must be incredible, but the pope was very reluctant to assume any responsibility for the ongoing care of that facility.

The funeral was an incredible funeral. World leaders came from everywhere. We were very slow to designate who would attend, and it irritated the Ivorian government greatly including the chief of protocol, a man named George Ouegnin. I remember him calling me in exasperation saying, "I don't know how many seats to reserve for the American delegation. I don't know how to place you because I don't know who's heading your delegation. Is it the president? Is it the vice president? Is it someone else? Who's coming?" In the end we sent the secretary of energy. Why that choice was made I couldn't begin to explain to you. That was a lady named O'Leary. I think Frances O'Leary. Anyway, we sent a modest delegation, and Secretary O'Leary headed that delegation.

The only possible link I can think of didn't materialize for another year or two. The funeral was December of '93. The death was December 7, 1993. I guess the funeral was soon after, but I'm not sure. In fact, they have the habit in those cultures of preserving the body until it's auspicious to have a funeral, so it's quite possible that the funeral was later by some weeks or even a couple of months. The point that comes to mind is another event that happened during my time, but this was in April of 1995.

April 28, 1995 I attended a ceremony for the first export of oil from Cote d'Ivoire. Cote d'Ivoire had off-shore deposits, and they were developed by a number of companies. There was certainly competition with French there for concessions. I don't know any of the details of it, but there were American companies that were successful in gaining some concessions, and on April 28, 1995 a tanker called the Red Teal loaded and shipped the first shipment of Ivorian crude. I haven't kept up with their exports over the years. I hope that it's still a modest source of revenue for the country. Of course we don't read about it or hear about it the way we know Nigeria's oil exports, so I presume that they've remained rather modest. In any case the secretary of energy headed our delegation to the funeral.

Something else that happened five weeks after Houphouet's death was the devaluation of the French West African franc, what we called the CFA, What did that stand for? I don't know what it stood for.

Q: Currency French Africa?

CECIL: Something like that. It was devalued by 50% after being pegged to the French franc for 45 years. There had been 50 CFA francs to the French franc for 45 years, but the exchange rate had grown so artificial that, I don't know if the French were waiting for Houphouet to die or if they just finally said, "We can't support this anymore," so overnight with no warning the rate was adjusted to 100 CFA to the franc and, of course, that had immediate repercussions throughout the economy.

I have just two or three other what I'll call vignettes I'd like maybe to share with you, and I'll pretty much have exhausted the memories I was able dredge up. One little story I recall perhaps is a slight indicator of the personality of Henri Konan-Bedie. When he became president after Houphouet's death, as I said earlier, we had not had a lot of contact with him in the national assembly, so we made efforts to get to know him better. Hume and I did call on him several times in his office in the presidency to discuss various issues. At one point Hume decided to invite him to his residence to lunch. He said, "Why not? The U.S.-Ivorian relationship is important, and the president himself maybe has an interest in demonstrating his esteem for the United States."

He invited the president and what I'll call I guess his personal secretary, a gentleman whose name at the moment slips my mind. Hume said, "It'll just be you, Mr. President, and your personal secretary, and me and my DCM. The four of us." The president accepted.

The two of them came. We had a very nice lunch at the residence, nice casual discussion. I don't think we solved any state problems or anything, but it was a nice occasion for everyone to relax and get to know each other a little bit better. Then at the end Hume and I were walking the two to the door, and Hume shook President Bedie's hand and said, "Thank you so much for coming, Mr. President." This is all in French, of course. "It was such an honor to have you for lunch today at the residence." Bedie said, "Yes, it was." I don't know if he meant it that way, but he took deference naturally.

Another little thing I would put into the record. I suppose when I get the transcript I can type this. I don't want to read it to you, but I considered this to be the best letter to any editor that I wrote during my foreign service career, and State Magazine published it in November 1994. It had to do with a liberalization in travel regulations that effected the eligibility of children who were in boarding school to go to relatives or friends for vacations. Up until 1994 if your child was in a boarding school and if you had, say, Christmas vacation or Easter vacation, you could bring them back to post. You had an overall dollar allowance, and you could apply that if you brought them back to post. But if you wanted to send them to a relative, for less money, you couldn't use any portion of the allowance for that. Finally these regulations were liberalized.

I inquired for the post when they were going to go into effect. I got an answer back saying well, they hadn't yet developed all the criteria. They had to determine whether it would be feasible to go to a designated relative. The letter I have here pretty much speaks for itself. Maybe I can type it into the record when we get to that point unless you have a scanner that you want to scan it.

Q: Why don't you type it in.

CECIL: The other thing for the record is an example of dealing with CODELs-Congressional Delegations-and some of the pitfalls that one must avoid. I was chargï¿½ in May of '94 when Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as president in South Africa. Mrs. Clinton went to attend the inauguration in her own plane, and a CODEL led by Congressman Stokes went. Quite a few congressmen went in that plane.

On their way back to Washington they needed to refuel, and so they chose Abidjan as their refueling stop at three in the morning. Mrs. Clinton's plane arrived first. We had all kinds of security, of course, laid on with the Ivorian authorities. We had the airport virtually to ourselves, and Mrs. Clinton's plane landed and taxied to the military portion of the airport. The CODEL plane which arrived about 30 minutes later landed and was held at the civilian side not very far away. You could see the two.

The CODEL when it was still in South Africa had asked us to please have handicraft vendors available at the airport so the CODEL could buy souvenirs during their stop. As I said, this is at three in the morning. The airport was virtually closed down, and we had already stressed with the Ivorian security authorities the need for tight security because of Mrs. Clinton. When we inquired about the possibility of having handicraft vendors there first of all the Ivorian authorities had to stop laughing before they even considered it a serious request.

Then we considered some of the practical difficulties at the airport. Normally it had just a couple of little shops that had airport art, that sort of thing, wood carvings, stuff like that but of course they were not open in the night. The idea of bringing the owners out or bringing other vendors... There were lots of vendors in town. We concluded that it was not feasible to select certain vendors and ask them to bring their stuff to the airport, and the little shops were hardly worth speaking about.

We decided at a control officers meeting to tell the delegation in South Africa that we wouldn't be able to arrange for souvenir vendors, but they didn't get the message. They arrived expecting the vendors, and I had an inquisition on the tarmac by CODEL Stokes and his senior administrative person, really taking me to task and accusing me of being disrespectful of the Congress by not arranging to have those vendors there. They said if they had only known that there weren't going to be any vendors, they would have arranged to depart from South Africa a couple of hours later so that their members could have done their shopping in South Africa. They were very unhappy with me.

Under Secretary for Management Richard Moose was traveling with Mrs. Clinton. I think he was on the Clinton plane. In any case, he walked up during the discussion, and he listened. He didn't really intervene, but he heard the Congressman and his assistant accusing me of being disrespectful of the Congress and of the members. He took it all in. He asked me after they had finished speaking and gone back to their plane, he asked me to send him a full report on how this happened and why, particularly about that message they didn't get. I had told our administrative officer to send a cable down to South Africa telling them it wouldn't be able to arrange what they asked for. As it turned out the admin officer was too busy, and it had slipped his mind so the cable was not sent.

Dick Moose wanted a full report. I even got a call from Washington while his plane was still in the air before it even landed in Washington. Then I got a call from his staff in Washington asking me how I was doing on that report. Was it on its way? I wrote a memo for the file giving my account of what happened, and I also received a cable back from Under Secretary Moose on May 14 copying me on the letter of apology he wrote to Congressman Stokes which I considered one of the worst cases I have ever seen of a senior department official failing to support the Foreign Service in trying to do what we thought was the right thing.

So the warning for future DCMs is: "Remember, if the Congressman says he wants to buy souvenirs, you've got to find time in the program even if it's three o'clock in the morning in an airport under tight security because the first lady is also there. Never mind. Create that shopping opportunity:"

Q: A question about going back to the time you were there. Did the dividing line between Muslim and Christian play much role while you were there?

CECIL: There were certainly lots of signs of the growing tensions, yes. No doubt about it. One of the most visible and tangible-or maybe the word is intangible-evidence of this is that in downtown Abidjan-what was called Plateau, the center of the downtown commercial district-there was no mosque, yet there was a beautiful cathedral. I think it was called St. Peter and St. Paul. A very modernesque design with beautiful stained glass windows inside by an African artist. It was of course the main Catholic cathedral of Abidjan. There were many other churches around the town.

On Fridays the Muslims gathered in a parking lot for Friday prayers. Hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. I've been there. No doubt hundreds and hundreds of Muslims, and they would have pray out in the open in this parking lot come rain or shine. The desire to build a mosque in downtown Abidjan was a sore point. The government finally came around to granting a piece of land. They did that about the time I left in 1995, and I understand a mosque was later constructed so that all of those Muslims who worked in the downtown area would have a place to go for Friday prayers.

I mentioned earlier the fact that the majority of the power, the important ministerial positions, were in the hands of southern Christians. Fewer positions were given to northern Muslims, so there was that. One of the advantages of Hume Horan being there was he probably learned more about Islam in Cote d'Ivoire than any previous American ambassador and I suppose any subsequent American ambassador. He met with the Muslim leaders. He could speak to them in Arabic if they could. His Arabic was better than theirs in quite a few cases. That certainly conveyed to the Ivorian Muslim leadership the fact that, "My goodness, here's an American ambassador who knows our religion and who speaks the language of our religion," something they had never seen before. I think it had helped convey the impression of a diverse America and an America that was perhaps more open and accepting of Islam than they had known up to that time. I don't know what they think today.

Q: Were we concerned about Islam as being a potential force? Not necessarily because of the religion but politically.

CECIL: We knew where the numbers were. The government of Cote d'Ivoire would not admit that it had a Muslim majority. They did not want to have a census. It's like Lebanon.

Q: Lebanon is still working on making a census.

CECIL: Our data, which I think probably relied mostly on UN sources, led us to believe that Muslims are probably between 52 to 55% of the country. Nowadays it's hard for me to say, "Did that include all those migrants from the northern countries: Mali, Niger, and so on?" It probably did, I'm not sure. But in any case we could see the demographics, and it was pretty clear to us that Islam was clearly spreading. When I was a graduate student at SAIS in 1962 to '64, I was studying Islam in Black Africa, and I wrote my masters thesis on the influence of Islam on Nigeria. It was clear to me 30 years later that the visible presence of Islam was much greater than it had been even in the '60s. There were mosques everywhere. It was just clear that the Muslim faith was spreading. We did not regard it in Cote d'Ivoire as a source of any fundamentalist threat. It's hard to generalize, but I would say that my experience in Cote d'Ivoire and even later in Niger a few years later showed me that by and large West African Islam is a very tolerant Islam. It's very synchretic. It incorporates a lot of indigenous beliefs into practices, even into the architecture. I have a color slide of a little tiny minaret on the road between Abidjan and Grand-Bassam, a little town where foreigners go to go to the beach on weekends. There was a row of handicraft vendors along the road at that time, and this was their mosque. Around the minaret was a little railing made out of cement, concrete, and the railing consisted of the stools of Akan chiefs or Baulï¿½ chiefs. The stool is the seat of authority and maybe even the soul. It's a wonderful example of the incorporation of an African traditional belief into the architecture of an Islamic religions building.

The other side of that is certainly in northern Nigeria there has been a lot of evidence of fundamentalist Islam and riots between the Christians and Muslims, so you can't generalize and say it's tolerant everywhere. Ivorian Muslims certainly seemed to me at the time to be very tolerant and not at all dogmatic about their beliefs.

Q: Were the Libyans messing around? Where was Qadhafi? Was he messing around at all?

CECIL: I don't recall any Libyan presence in Cote d'Ivoire. I never came across it. I don't know if they were even represented. Houphouet was very conservative. He was very slow, very late in opening relations with the Soviet Union. It was the '80s before they established relations, and then they broke relations two years later. There was a period when they didn't have them, and then they again reestablished relations.

Q: By that time things had pretty much gone from bad to worse in the Soviet Union.

CECIL: Yes, maybe. I'm not sure, but his general conservatism and his general alignment with the West might have led him not to have relations with Libya. I don't recall any Libyan presence. In Niger of course it was obvious the Libyan presence, but I don't remember it in Cote d'Ivoire.

Q: Chuck, I guess this is maybe a good place to stop. We'll pick this up, and what will we talk about next?

CECIL: What happened was I left Abidjan in the summer of '95. I think it was probably July. Yes, July 17, 1995 we left. The Horans left 11 days earlier on July 6. I came back to Washington, and after a brief home leave I went to the Freedom of Information Office at my request because I was seriously thinking about retirement, and I thought that would be a nice place, not very demanding yet interesting. I looked at it as a place maybe to recoup my energies after three years of a lot of work in Abidjan and a chance to take stock.

As it happened as we'll discuss next time, I only spent about maybe three months in the Freedom of Information Office because during that time I was asked if I would like to be a chief of mission. We can go into that story later. I was asked if I would like to be chief of mission in Conakry, Guinea. As it turned out I was sent to Niamey, Niger.

That's where we are in 1995.

Q: Great!

Cecil, File 9b

Q: This is just an addition to Chuck Cecil's session.

CECIL: Just a postscript. I noted that Ambassador Horan left on July 6, 1995, and I left on July 17. As I noted at the beginning, we had arrived within four weeks of each other in 1992. I remember looking into the question of the arrival and departure of ambassadors and DCMs in Abidjan during my time there.

Both the ambassador and the DCM had left in '92 within a very short time. They had arrived in '89 virtually together. They had arrived in '86 together. I just thought there was a bad pattern there. On the one hand it's really good that the Department allows ambassadors to choose their DCM, and that's certainly a valued prerogative. On the other hand, there's a high institutional cost when both the ambassador and the DCM leave together. A lot of knowledge goes out the door with them. I have often thought maybe it's a bad policy. Maybe there should be more of an effort made to have the DCM stay a year beyond the ambassador's departure to ensure an orderly transition as the new ambassador arrives. It wasn't observed in Abidjan, and there are many other cases where it isn't observed. I think where that happens at posts there's a little hiccup in operations.

Hopefully, political, management, economic and consular officers, some of them will remain to carry over some of the institutional memory, but it may be less smooth than it could be. I was asked by Ambassador Lannon Walker who succeeded Hume Horan, if I would stay a year to be his DCM, but I declined that. I said, "Thank you, but first of all three years here is quite enough, I think. I've learned a lot, and I'm ready to move on." I thought Lannon Walker should have his own DCM, somebody other than me. I declined that offer, and he didn't press it.

Q: You mentioned that Jimmy Carter, former president, had stopped off there.

CECIL: Carter had been in Liberia in some effort to mediate part of the Liberian civil conflict, but he had to change planes in Abidjan because only a very small plane could take him to Monrovia. He had come into Abidjan on something larger, I forget what. He asked to take advantage of his airport stop to meet with the Ivorian minister of Health to discuss Cote d'Ivoire's effort to eradicate Guinea worm. President Carter had gotten quite interested in Guinea worm and the problem. It's a terrible parasite. He was trying to support World Health Organization efforts to eradicate it from the world. He had gotten promises from DuPont Chemical to provide the pesticide that kills the larvae of the guinea worm in ponds where it grows and where humans contact it. I think it was also DuPont who provided free of charge a very thin plastic membrane that people can use in villages to filter their water. That's actually all it takes to eliminate the Guinea worm parasite from the drinking water. It's so large it can be seen with the human eye. If you hold a glass of water up to the light, you can see these little things floating in the water. He was able to get this plastic membrane free to provide to governments to distribute to their people.

Cote d'Ivoire was not making the progress that one would expect in this program. Several other countries were doing much better in eliminating the parasite, so he wanted to give a push to the Ivorian efforts. The Ivorian minister of health came out to the airport, had a room set aside. Rosalynn Carter was traveling with her husband. She was the note taker. I was able to sit in. I think Ambassador Horan was there. Anyway, I was in the room.

The story I like is that President Carter said to the minister, "You know, Mr. Minister, there's no longer any Guinea worm in Guinea. The government of Guinea has totally eradicated the parasite in Guinea." He said, "There's a discussion in WHO circles and elsewhere that maybe we need to change the name of this parasite." He said, "There's even been proposal that we name it for the last country in the world to eradicate the parasite. Mr. Minister," he said, "I really hope we don't have to call it theCote d'Ivoire worm." The minister took note, and we can say that they actually probably did increase their efforts.

One thing we did to help them was the Peace Corps found a volunteer with a degree in, I think it was, microbiology, but it was certainly in some relevant scientific field. They assigned her to the ministry of health in Abidjan, one of the very few volunteers to live in Abidjan. Her job was to help manage the Ivorian effort. I think she was still there when I left, but I think that probably did give a boost. I don't know if they've totally eliminated it today, but certainly Jimmy Carter performed a very useful function in goosing the minister there. Get on with the effort!

Q: We'll pick this up the next time when you're doing Freedom of Information work in '95.

CECIL: I really won't have anything to say about that. It was an interesting opportunity to read old files, to determine if they could be released to the public-a good chance to review history by reading lots of reports from Africa and the Middle East, the areas I was assigned to work on. But after about three months I was nominated to be Chief of Mission in Niger. So we'll talk about that next time.

Q: Today is the 8th of January 2010 with Chuck Cecil. This is a part of our continuing thing. Chuck, what will we be discussing this time?

CECIL: We'll talk today about my three years as chief of mission in Niger, from the summer of 1996 to the summer of 1999. I might have a little preamble before I get to my arrival in Niamey.

Q: Do your preamble and have at it.

CECIL: The preamble would be that my experience might cast an interesting light on the process of selecting chiefs of mission, ambassadors, to go to posts. I don't know how often this happens, but this is what happened in my case.

I was DCM in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. In 1995 I was nearing the end of my tour. In early summer I received a call from Deputy Assistant Secretary Bill Twaddell in the Africa bureau who asked me if I would like to have my name put on a list of candidates to be chief of mission in Sierra Leone. I was flattered to get the call, but I said to Bill who was a good friend of mine, I said, "Honestly speaking, it's not a country I could see myself spending three years in. It just didn't quite grab my attention." I was already beginning to think about retiring and turning my hobby, photography, into my second career. I was quite prepared to go back to Washington, and after a year or so retire. I thanked him and said, "No offense, please, I hope, but I'd just rather not be on that list." My ambassador in Cote d'Ivoire, Hume Horan, told me really I should let my name be on these lists. He said the important thing is to get your name on those lists that go up to the seventh floor. They begin to recognize your name. Just because you put your name on a list doesn't mean you're going to get the job. There were always several names. He said, "Just becoming known on the seventh floor is a good thing in itself, so if you ever get another call, maybe you should put your name on the list."

As a matter of fact, after a while I got another call from Bill. How about Guinea this time? I have to admit it didn't really interest me all that much, but taking Hume Horan's advice, I said, "Well, sure, Bill. That would be fine. Why don't you just go ahead." That happened, I guess. I ended my tour in Abidjan. I went back to Washington. I took up my assignment in the Freedom of Information office, which was kind of a place-holder while I decided whether I was actually going to retire or not.

One day the phone rang, and it was Bill Twaddell again. He said, "Congratulations, Chuck! You're on your way to Niger!" I said, "Niger? Are you sure, Bill? We never talked about Niger. We talked about Guinea." He said, "No, I've got the list right here in front of me, and it says Niger. I don't think the White House will have a candidate. Of course, we still have to go over there and get their okay, but I don't think they'll have a candidate for Niger, so it looks like you might be on your way."

I was delighted because Niger to me was inherently much more interesting and much more important. I was told later that what had happened was that Under Secretary Dick Moose had made the decision. Richard Moose, of course, had been in the Carter administration as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. Not to be confused with George Moose who was the Assistant Secretary for African affairs when this selection process was actually going on.) .Dick Moose had come back in the '90s under Clinton as Under Secretary for Management I think it was. I guess he must have sat on the committee, the D committee. I'm not real sure how he got a hand in the process. This was the same Moose who had apologized to the Congressmen in 1994 for my failure to provide an opportunity to buy souvenirs on the tarmac in Abidjan at 3:00AM when they were en route back to Washington after attending Nelson Mandela's inauguration in South Africa. I guess Moose didn't hold that against me.

Anyway, I was told that Dick Moose looked over the names coming up to the seventh floor and said, "Well, first thing that we do is hold all the French-speaking assignments and look at them as a group." Apparently that was a first step. Then when the day came he looked at me among others, and he said, "Cecil's had five assignments in the Arab world and three so far in Africa. Rather than send him to a place like Guinea, let us send him somewhere in the Sahara where maybe some of that Arabic experience will come in handy. That argument seems to have prevailed. The careful process of soliciting candidates interested in particular posts was set aside, the cards were re-shuffled, and re-dealt.

It was curious. I was happy. It was, I thought, a great assignment. Some other things happened before I got there, but that's a part of the story. I thought of this as a good outcome. That was sometime in the fall of '95. Shortly after that the country director for AF?W, Dane Smith, asked if I would come and work in AF/W as a second deputy director for the few months that it would take while my nomination was going through its various stages. The office was very overworked as a result of an inspection report some years earlier. They had abolished the second deputy director position that that office had traditionally had for years and years. They had one for the Anglophone countries in West Africa and one from the Francophone. Some inspector's team thought that was too many.

I went in for about seven or eight months, was the deputy director for francophone Africa, and that was a great way to prepare for my assignment, allowing me to see Niger's role in a regional context..

Q: What was happening in francophone Africa at that time?

CECIL: The most important thing for me was that in February of 1996 the democratically elected president of Niger, a man named Mahamane Ousmane, was overthrown in a military coup. That was to determine the nature of the rest of my assignment because we have a law that says, of course, when a democratically elected government is overthrown, then our assistance programs must be terminated. At the time I was nominated we had a USAID mission in Niamey and a program of about $19,000,000 a year in various kinds of development assistance. That was immediately called into question. By the time I arrived in Niamey that summer, I think it was probably August of '96, AID was already beginning the process of phasing out their program. Rather than arriving to find an AID program on the increase with lots of positive things happening, I found an AID program in a phase-out mode. A lot of my attention the next three years was devoted to that.

The coup was not quite bloodless but almost. The former president was placed under house arrest. The man who led the coup was chief of staff of the army, a man named Ibrahim Mainassara Barï¿½. He assumed the presidency and promised elections in a few months. In fact, they did have elections in July of '96 before I arrived. The elections were generally regarded as fraudulent. Barï¿½ was the victor with 52% of the vote. They were following the French system where if you don't get a majority on the first round you have a run-off, but he handled that problem by getting 52%. When I arrived, I think it was August, I found a military government in place pretending to be democratically elected, but everybody knew it hadn't been. That was the first task confronting me: How to manage the phase-out of our AID program and how to carry on a relationship with the government which was distinctly out of favor in Washington.

I should say a word about the mission. We were a small embassy, a small mission. There was a USIA representative, the Public Affairs Officer. We did have a Marine security guard detachment, and we did have the AID mission. We had no CIA station. We had no military attachï¿½ of our own. At the time we did have a large Peace Corps program, and that turned out to be the most important demonstration of our support for the people of Niger.

We had 34 direct-hire U.S. government employees counting the Marines. We had 113 Peace Corps volunteers when I arrived, and during my time it probably rose as high as 130 but was more often in the area of 115-120. We had 389 Foreign Service Nationals employed by the mission including the AID mission. That number sounds high to me, and I'm guessing it must include our locally hired security guards as well.

The non-official, American presence in Niger was very small. There were five different American missionary organizations comprising 180 American citizens at several locations in the country. Some of them were doing medical missionary work. Proselytizing was definitely a low-key thing, not a major high profile effort since Niger is, of course, almost entirely a Muslim country. There were two church-related development agencies; Catholic Relief Services and World Vision had offices in the country.

There were a variety of other NGOs working in development assistance. Africare was probably the most important one of those. We had two American oil companies in the country exploring. Exxon International was in the southeastern part of the country over near Lake Chad exploring, and Hunt Oil, a small independent oil company, had a concession in the far north near the Libyan border. They had not started their work when I arrived, but they did launch their program after I had arrived. That was pretty much the entire American presence. There wasn't much else to it.

Q: What were American interests in Niger when you got there?

CECIL: Of course stability is always an interest. In 1995, the year before I arrived, the government of Niger had finally concluded a peace accord with rebellious Tuareg tribesmen in the north of Niger. The Tuaregs are periodically rebellious. They're a nomadic people and live in Mali and southern Algeria, some few in Libya and in Niger. They've never felt that they were receiving their proper proportion of their governments' revenues.

In the case of Niger, Niger has uranium, and Niger at that time was the world's second largest exporter of uranium-may still be-and all the uranium was up in the areas inhabited by Tuaregs. So this is somewhat analogous to the Niger delta problem in Nigeria where the people in the Niger Delta don't think they're getting their share of the oil revenues. In Niger the Tuaregs didn't think they were getting their share of the uranium revenues.

We were happy to see the peace accord because there was some concern that Libya was playing off the Tuareg insurrection and trying to increase its influence with the Tuaregs. There was concern that if the Tuareg rebellion spread it could affect Algeria and Mali. Mali had a stable democratic government. Algeria was extremely important for its oil and gas resources. We wanted to see stability and the continuation of the peace process. We also wanted to see Exxon and Hunt conduct their exploration programs. If they found anything significant obviously that would not only contribute to Niger's prosperity but also create more jobs for Americans and profits for the companies' concerned.

What else? The promotion of democracy and good governance has been an American objective for years and years. The coup in Niger set us back in that country, but that continued to be an objective for Washington-always to try to find ways to promote a democratic government and to build civic institutions. The resources didn't follow, though, to support those objectives, so a lot of it was words and not the necessary resources.

One of the basic questions during my time was how do you deal with a government that has come to power through illegitimate means? Washington wanted a kind of hands-off attitude. This was more obvious when Susan Rice became Assistant Secretary for African affairs. At the time of the coup and during George Moose's assistant secretary-ship, Susan had been over at the NSC in charge of African affairs. Then after a year or so, after I'd been in Niger maybe a year, maybe a little less, she became the assistant secretary of state for AF. She was much more forceful in wanting to sanction the government of Niger for being illegitimate than George Moose had been.

This set up a kind of situation in which Washington's views and the analysis coming in from the field were quite different. The relationship between my embassy and the State Department became more and more contentious as Washington liked less and less what we were reporting. The essence of what we were reporting was that even in a government that has come to power illegitimately, there may be, and in this case in Niger there were, conscientious, honest, hard-working government officials who were working for the best interest of their country. They didn't participate in the coup, had nothing to do with it, but they had been brought into positions at the ministerial level.My argument was that we need to cultivate these people and do everything we can to strengthen their influence in this government to try to move the country back toward a democratic path. Washington's attitude was we should minimize our contact with the government of Niger. That's sort of hard to do when you're sitting there in the capital.

One of the ironic things was I don't believe hardly a week went by, certainly many months of the year this was true, hardly a week went by that we did not receive a telegram from the Department asking us to try to persuade the government of Niger to do something. They always begin the same. They will describe an issue. Very often it's in the UN where we need a vote or it's some international conference that's about to convene somewhere where we either need a vote or we need support for our position on various issues. Could be economic issues, environmental issues, rule of law issues, whatever.

We get these cables coming out from the Department saying, "Please go the highest appropriate level in your host country government and get their support on this issue." We're constantly being asked to do that, and in most African countries when you talk about the highest appropriate level and you talk about getting a country's vote in an international forum, you almost always have to go to the foreign minister or sometimes to the president or if there's a prime minister maybe go to him. Those are the three people you almost always have to go to to get a vote. I'm always getting these requests to go see the highest appropriate level, and at the same time I'm hearing through email messages and phone calls from the bureau, "Now you don't want to have much contact with that government. We don't really think they're legitimate."

Chas Freeman wrote The Diplomat's Dictionary. He has a wonderful definition there which in a nutshell describes the relationship between my office and the African bureau in Washington over the three-year period that I was there. I'd just like to read it into the record.

Q: Please do.

CECIL: The term that Chas is defining is "reporting, reward for honesty". He says, "The rewards for diplomats who report honestly and forthrightly on foreign developments which contradict the convictions of their leaders at home have been well established by history. They will first be ignored, then charged with disloyalty, and finally dismissed. Diplomatic reporting is, therefore, always a contest between the professional integrity of those doing it abroad and the prejudices of those who read it at home." That's the end of the quote. The only thing I can say is that Assistant Secretary Rice didn't dismiss me before the end of my tour, but I didn't get a fourth year or another appointment after that, either.

Q: Going back to the coups before your time, was this just a power play? Was this greed? What was motivating the coup?

CECIL: President Ousmane was elected in 1993 if I recall correctly. His government was a coalition with another one or two parties. There was a prime minister from one of the coalition parties. As the scenario unfolded, Ousmane did not get along very well with his prime minister, and at a certain point in 1994 I believe it was, the president issued a decree which severely restricted or cut back the authority of the prime minister. The result of that was that the prime minister's party withdrew its support in the national assembly for the president's program.

The president stopped attending the periodic meetings of something like a ministerial council. The constitution says he's supposed to attend these meetings, but he stopped because he didn't want to be in the meetings, which were chaired by the prime minister.

The two men were unable to come to terms, and the president said that he would dissolve the national assembly. He did that once. He's only allowed by the constitution to do it once a year, and he made it clear that he was going to do it again as soon as he could by the constitution, and that would have been in February of '96 that he would have been able to do it again. Following his first dissolution the results of the election to choose members of a new national assembly made the president's position even more untenable because his party lost even more control in the assembly as other parties aligned against him.

You could say that the military simply lost patience with the civilian politicians. Both the president and the prime minister had kicked several issues into the supreme court for decision, and the supreme court wasn't very happy with this. It said these are really political questions. They're not legal questions. The country's experiment with a freely elected democratic government wasn't proceeding very smoothly. The military simply said, "We can fix this," at least that was their outward position. When President Barï¿½, Colonel Barï¿½, took over in February, he promised elections and said at the moment he wasn't going to be a candidate, but sometime between February and July when the elections actually took place, he changed his mind, and he decided he would be a candidate, and he got the 52%.

That's in a very quick nutshell what led to the coup. If the civilians had been able to cooperate and manage the country's problems, perhaps the coup would never have occurred, but we don't know for sure.

Initially I think there was hope among the people that this new group under Barï¿½ might be able to move the country forward, but Barï¿½ was surprisingly not a very forceful leader. You would think that a career military officer who had risen to be chief of staff of the armed forces would be a strong leader, but over the next two years or so, he was clearly overly influenced by those around him. Some of those around him as I said earlier were very fine men, very conscientious and hard working, but unfortunately there was another group. You could call them thugs. They were out only for their own interests. They didn't have a democratic nerve in their body. They were all for power and control and wanted to get whatever they could out of their positions. Unfortunately, this latter group had undue influence on Barï¿½. We'll get to the end of that story I guess a little farther along.

Another point I want us to talk about, because Niger provides a very quick and simple example, is a lack of cooperation among U.S. government agencies in the country during my time. The example of that is that USAID, which of course often has more money than State, their mission had a satellite communications link. This is 1996 now, remember, a communications link that allowed them to access the world wide web, the internet. The embassy (State) did not. One of my requests was, "Well, as you phase out, please transfer that satellite communications capability to the embassy so that we who remain behind can have the benefit of that." AID wouldn't do it. I even went back to Washington by message, by phone, trying to get the Department's help, and the Department wouldn't even get into it. They said, "No. AID has the right to do what they want with it. It's their normal procedure when they phase out of a country to offer any equipment they have to any other AID mission that might want it. Other AID missions get first right of refusal," in other words.

That in the end is what happened. The dish was taken down and shipped out of the country to another AID mission, and we were left again with less than state-of- the-art communications in the State Department component of the mission. I have always found that very difficult to reconcile with my ideas about how we're supposed to all be allies and working together to achieve the same ends, but petty interagency concerns seemed to often prevail.

There was another problem we confronted during my time and that was this point about the law requiring us to close the AID mission, which hampered our effort to promote democracy and good governance. There's a part of the law, I think it was called Section 508, that did not allow us to spend any U.S. government money training anyone who could be considered to be a government official. The definition of government official was not very precise.

We pointed out to that if we were out to promote democracy, one thing we could usefully do would be to provide workshops or seminars with experts from Washington to locally elected council members. Niger still had a very active functioning system of local government. People competed for office and were elected to office. We said some of these people have never served in any kind of public office before. Some of them were illiterate. This would be a wonderful opportunity to have a workshop or a seminar giving them our view about the responsibilities of local government officials and how you serve constituents and how you get things done, but Washington said, "These are government officials. You can do it before they are sworn in to their seats between the time they're elected and the time they're sworn in. That would be permissible, but once they're sworn in no, you can't do that."

We proposed that the law be amended but of course we didn't get anywhere with that. If it's ever happened since I don't know because it's an issue I did lose touch with after I finally left the country, but it's another case where we're hampered by our own legislation or our interpretation of it. That same interpretation prohibited us from inviting military officers to seminars on civilian-military relations. The Department of Defense does a lot of that, and we couldn't do that because we couldn't spend any money to invite a military officer from Niger to participate-the very people we should be wanting to cultivate and influence!.

There were a lot of frustrations along those lines...

Q: I can imagine!

CECIL: There's one final point about the AID program I should mention, a little document drawn up at my request. This is a draft study. It's called Supporting Change and Changing Support, 36 Years of AID Assistance to Niger dated March 28, 1997. I did everything I could to delay the closure of the AID mission, but when it became clear that the mission was going to close, I said to the mission director, "I want you to write up a short record to tell us, to answer the question, 'What have we received for 36 years of USAID activity in Niger.'" I said, "I want you to have two readers in mind. I want you to have first Senator Jesse Helms in mind, who might come along saying, 'What have we got to show for all this money for 36 years,' and I want you to have a good journalist who's experienced in international affairs in mind as your other reader, who might come to this report and turn it into some kind of article for his newspaper."

The mission director strongly resisted writing any such report. He dragged his feet. He found reasons he couldn't get to it. He had so much to do with closing out. I finally reached the point where I said, "If you want any kind of a memo from me on your performance when you leave here, I've got to have this report first." Only under that kind of pressure did he finally produce this report which is 16 pages long. In typical AID fashion he contracted out the drafting, hiring someone to come from the States and spend at least a couple of weeks-I actually think it was longer-in Niamey, writing the report. Even so, it was never officially issued and blessed by AID. The final bureaucratic pirouette. He said, "Of course this report might have legal or other policy ramifications, so I can't just issue it in my own name. It'll have to go back to Washington and be reviewed by our legal staff and by our policy people." That's why the copy I have today is stamped "draft, March 28, 1997." It was never ever issued in any other form than that. I doubt that there are many copies that can be found in any file today.

Q: When you're editing your transcript of this oral history, if you want to put some excerpts from that, conclusions, whatever you think might be pertinent from that, please do.

CECIL: I don't know how a person would access it these days. I don't know if it's available under the Freedom of Information Act, for instance, if it's not an official document. I suppose our other reporting is accessible. Hopefully it will be interesting reading for some researcher some day.

One which I re-read the other day before coming here was titled, The Future of Islamic Fundamentalism in Niger. Back in 1998-99 that was a topic of some interest. It was obviously before al-Qaeda blew up the twin towers, but we looked at that subject as best we could. I'll just say for the record our conclusions were that while there was always some potential for fundamentalist influences to grow, Niger's history was not a troubling one in that regard. The Nigerien attitude toward Islam has always been very tolerant. There's not much formal religious structure in the country, but there was one man regarded as the senior of the imams, and he was known to be quite tolerant not only of different forms of Islam, but also of the Western religions, the other religions as well.

Christian missionaries who worked in the country didn't vigorously proselytize. They were free to do their work and, of course, they conducted their church services. In fact, Niger's official holidays included Easter, a remnant of the French colonial period. As far as Islam was concerned, the country was not troublesome, though there was an incident during my time in which a church in Maradi was burned, for reasons I'm not aware of. We did argue that poverty can engender desperation and, therefore, that might lead to religious fundamentalism, but we did not see it as a likely development back at the end of the '90s. I think it's probably still that way. Northern Nigeria, on the other hand, has been afflicted by a number of terrible outbreaks of violence at least partly attributable to religious fundamentalism. I often asked Nigeriens to explain to me why Nigeria is afflicted with this fundamentalism and Niger is not. I think it's because Christians from the south of Nigeria are much more numerous and much more influential in Nigeria-therefore a target of envy and hostility-than is the case in Niger, where there are almost no indigenous Christians.

Q: How about the Peace Corps in Niger?

CECIL: The Peace Corps remained the only really visible evidence of our support for the people of Niger as they tried to confront their very difficult environment and very difficult living conditions. My sound bite back in those days for anybody who wanted to talk about Niger was, "Niger is the world's poorest Muslim country." That was using per capita income as my measure. Also, Niger was continually ranked within two or three of the bottom countries in the world by the UN's Index of Human Development. During my time the only countries ranked lower than Niger were Sierra Leone and Rwanda both of which were either in a state of civil war or just recovering from one. Then we had Niger.

The Peace Corps presence was no doubt the most productive thing we did during those years after the coup of 1996. I'd also seen the Peace Corps working in Cote d'Ivoire. There's no doubt in my mind that we get more benefit per dollar spent on the Peace Corps than any other thing the U.S. government does. The volunteers were spread throughout the southern part of the country, living in the villages in the absolute most basic conditions you can imagine. No running water. No electricity of course. Yet we had a very high third-year extension rate. They seemed to thrive in those conditions. They were working in health care, in agricultural improvement programs. They weren't teaching English which was an activity you often find in other countries, but we weren't in the school system. We were in the villages living with the people. Some of the volunteers were working on environmental issues trying to help prevent or minimize soil erosion, for instance. A variety of really grass roots activities.

I visited the volunteers as often as I could. I've always felt that I needed to travel around any country I'm in if I'm really going to know it, and I also insisted that my staff do as much travel as they could as well. Visiting the volunteers in their villages was one very visible way that I could demonstrate to the government of Niger that we regarded the Peace Corps presence as an important one. It was also a way of gently reminding the government that the government of Niger is essentially responsible for the security of the volunteers. Of course I would always call on local government officials in the areas that I visited. That was always my first stop. I think it contributed to raising the profile of the Peace Corps in the eyes of the government of Niger.

In some cases I even took government officials with me. For instance the governor ("prefet") of the region around Zinder. He spent a whole day with me on my first trip making the circuit of two or three villages that I went to. He was a military officer and he had never seen the volunteers out in their villages, and it was quite an eye opener for him to see that. "You've really got Americans living out here under these conditions?" I remember another case near Gourï¿½, in the far southeast. The deputy governor spent a day with me also as I made my rounds.

The Peace Corps was a wonderful institution. I have the greatest admiration for those people, and they contribute so much to our image. There is no better money spent.

Q: Were there efforts to diminish the Peace Corps back in Washington?

CECIL: No, not during that time. There was in fact an attempt to increase the number of volunteers worldwide to 10,000. That was announced and talked about, but the Clinton administration didn't get its shoulder behind it. It didn't push hard enough, so that did not happen.

We held pretty steadily in Niger in the neighborhood of 110 to 130 volunteers. I understand recently just this past year that the Peace Corps budget has reached a new high. I don't know what that means in terms of the number of volunteers, but we didn't see any efforts to reduce their presence in Niger. In some ways they were insulated from the other attitudes in Washington.

You can tell me what other aspects you might be interested in.

Q: I'm wondering, did you sense the... I don't want to put this in pejorative terms, but we seem to shy away from criticizing the government of Nigeria. Sometimes there's a tendency to pick on a small government, like Niger, on the part of our assistant secretary. Then there's staff and all, the ones they can't do anything about and to show that they're really tough.

CECIL: We can be tough on the countries that don't matter so much. There might have been something of that. Maybe Washington said, "This is a good place to make a point, to demonstrate a principal. You overthrow your government, you're going to suffer."

Washington carried it beyond just stopping resources. They actually proposed activities that we in the embassy had to say as clearly as we could would be counterproductive. I'll give you an example. Not only would this activity not be allowed by the government of Niger, it would certainly close off any hope of future dialogue. It really hasn't been very well considered. What I'm talking about is this example:

At some point Washington proposed that NDI-the National Democratic Institute-send a team out to give workshops to political parties in the opposition to try to help them become more effective. More effective in raising funds, more effective in mobilizing people, more effective at presenting their message and working in opposition to the government. We said, "This sounds pretty naï¿½ve to us."

First of all, I thought that the U.S. government's rule was, and it is an AID rule, that we need to be impartial in any training or assistance that we give to political parties. No way can you conduct a workshop only for members of the opposition. What do you think the party that supports the government will be doing? What do you think the government's going to be doing? Washington's idea was they wouldn't conduct the workshop in Niger. They would bring trainers from somewhere else and conduct workshops somewhere in the region, inviting Nigeriens they had identified. Well, of course, we pointed out that the government of Niger might not let these people leave, might not give them the permission they needed. It seemed so poorly conceived that we were really amazed at the idea.

There was another proposal that we work with one of the two labor federations, the one that was in opposition to the government, and help them to become more effective. We pointed out that throughout '97 and '98 Niger was afflicted with one strike after another by one group whether it was teachers or government workers or whatever. There were just so many strikes going on. We had to ask Washington, "Is your objective here to promote civil unrest? Is that what you're trying to do? This country doesn't need a stronger labor movement. It's got a very strong labor movement already, and it's retarding the economic development of the country and the education of the school children and all of these things you might expect will follow. It revealed a mindset in Washington, "We want to do anything we can do to the detriment of President Barï¿½ and his gang of thugs," as they saw everyone fitting under that category.

We did stop the NDI program from happening. I'm glad to say that we made such a strong argument that I guess even Washington finally realized the futility of their approach.

Q: Were you getting friends coming back and saying, "Hey, you're not with the program. You better watch it."

CECIL: I don't think anyone ever sent me a warning message. Maybe I guess I could see what was happening in that we weren't getting any of the support that we were requesting, not only in something simple like the satellite dish. I also sent in a number of cables over a period of a year, year and a half, making the arguments for retaining an AID mission in Niamey. At one point I said, "Even if we just focus on democracy and good governance, we should have a resident AID representative to oversee these programs because we could spend quite a bit of money doing these things and part-time coverage from some other post doesn't work." The idea was that Bamako would start managing the minimal activities in Niger. That just doesn't work. You have to be here daily to deal with issues as they arise, to meet with people who show up, to pro-actively seek out targets of opportunity. But we didn't get support on that.

I sent a detailed and precise argument in a message. I think the message was entitled, "Can we afford to close AID in Niger?" or something like that. I was making all the arguments for keeping an AID presence. I got a nice one page, one and a half page reply from Brian Atwood, the administrator of AID at the time. He told me he appreciated and understood all of my arguments. He thought, in fact, they did have some merit but AID was in a time of phasing down certain programs and needing money to carry on others, and Niger was unfortunately a place where they could take funds and use them elsewhere in more favorable circumstances, more favorable environments. His was the only response I received from Washington. The Department was silent.

In general the State Department never answered what I'll call our policy cables. The DCM and I spent quite a bit of time over a period of a couple of years at various points along the way making the best arguments we could for keeping an AID presence or for doing other things. Usually we were just ignored.

I can probably be accused of a certain naivetï¿½. Throughout my career I always thought that policy should be derived from a process of careful analysis of the pro and con factors surrounding any proposal. I relished intellectual debate, and felt that the way you determine the best course of action is to put your reasons out there for others to analyze and critique. You should do that, after all; no one's infallible, and we should want our lines of reasoning to be examined by our peers to see if there are any flaws. But you reach truth, or conclusions, through a process of give-and-take. It became clear to me in Niamey that those in charge in Washington were not interested in examining the premises on which they had already reached their conclusions; they weren't about to open their policies up for debate again. We were expected to be loyal executors of policies already determined. My conception of loyalty was that I should tell my supervisors in Washington the facts on the ground as I saw them, and give them my best analysis of where current trends-either of current policies or of proposed ones-would lead us. But no new information was desired. We were an annoyance. Read that Chas Freeman definition of honesty in reporting again.

Q: Usually with a country like Niger you have a fairly junior desk officer, so this would be at the central African or...

CECIL: It's the office of West African affairs. The desk officer was desk officer for Niger and probably Burkina Faso as well I think. There was also Benin and Togo, small countries that might have been under his or her supervision. There were two desk officers during my time. I wouldn't blame the desk officer for these things. It's true that the first officer was stronger than the second, but I think the issues, the guidance, was coming from on high and a desk officer would not be able to overturn that.

Q: During this time were you able, you might say, to play the Libyan card? Libya does border on Niger, and Libya's a treat or something like that.

CECIL: I guess people were aware of Libya's negative influence in those days, but that didn't seem to overrule the objections that they had on other grounds.

Just to give another example or two. We had proposed under the heading of democracy and governance what was called the Women in Politics program. This was a program that AID had in a number of countries where you would take women who are active in their communities. Some might hold positions in local government or whatever. We have seminars and programs to try to make them more effective, raise their sensitivity, educate them a little bit.

One of our proposals was to have a Women in Politics workshop in Niger. Another to try to strengthen the media. There are quite a few newspapers in Niger, and they managed to survive during this period although there were a number of efforts to punish them. Nevertheless there were several newspapers to work with. There were also NGOs. There were human rights NGOs, for instance. We proposed working with these kinds of organizations. Washington considered the Women in Politics idea for about six months, or at least we thought they were considering it for that long. I think probably earlier it was put on the shelf and we just weren't told. The result was those other proposals that I mentioned. Instead of Women in Politics and instead of supporting the media and the NGOs, we got the idea of training opposition political party members and training the labor federation that opposes the government. It was always hard for me to understand why Washington paid so little attention, gave so little weight to our analysis. Clearly we were out of favor.

Q: You have this sort of thing. We alluded to it before. As I do these oral histories I find some are particularly prone to find countries in Africa, small countries, to be whipping boys, to get dumped on to prove, , even if you're a woman, that you have balls at the policy level, just to show that you're really tough. You know you can do this with a small country without any particular repercussions, where you wouldn't be doing that to China or Egypt or a country like that.

CECIL: There a couple of things that happened that I should note. Maybe we should jump to one of the final most important things that happened during my tour, where there is one tiny little insight that might be good for some PhD researcher in the future when he's researching the history of the period.

President Barï¿½ became increasingly unpopular because his government was not achieving anything for the people really, and thugs in the government were never hesitating in using intimidation and suppression to achieve their means. Honest and conscientious people didn't resort to these kinds of tactics and didn't have people at their disposal who would go out and beat people up or set fires, such as the fire in the printing plant that printed the main opposition newspaper, for instance.

Things were continuing on a downward spiral, and in April, it was April 9, 1999, President Bare was assassinated. He was at the airport about to board a helicopter to go somewhere else in the country, and the presidential guard opened fire on him. The guard was commanded by Major Daouda Malam Wankï¿½. I think it's pretty much accepted that he planned this assassination and he gave the order at the airport to fire. The guard opened fire with some very large artillery against the president as he was moving from his car to his helicopter. He was hit. He was accompanied by one of the sous-prefets (deputy governors) of Niger. In fact, the one who had spent a day with me visiting Peace Corps volunteers in his region in the far eastern part of the country. He was an unusual person in that he was an Arab. There were not many native Nigerien Arabs, but he traced his ancestry back centuries to the time when Morocco exerted substantial influence over this part of the Sahara.. This man tried to help the president get back to the car, and the firing continued, and they were both killed. This was I believe probably a Friday if I recall correctly, so we were in the office.

There was no other public reaction. There were no demonstrations and no celebrations, either. The place was pretty much quiet and clamped down. I got a call before the day was over. (The assassination happened in the morning.) I got a call from one of the military members who had been close to Barï¿½ asking if he could come and see me the next morning, so I said yes, of course. He did come on Saturday morning. I think this was their effort, the new group, the coup leaders, to try to dampen any further negative U.S. reaction because he came purporting to ask my advice on how to proceed at this point.

They had closed the borders the previous day. I said, "One of the first things you need to do if you're trying to create the idea that you're in control is you need to open borders again and return to life as usual, as normal." When he was there, he said, "Major Wankï¿½ would like to see you." I said, "Fine," of course. I think it was going to be the next day. Wankï¿½ was calling in several ambassadors. I know the French ambassador was there before me.

I went to meet this man whom I had never met before. When I arrived in his office, he said, "Do you know about my role in the coup of 1996?" I said to him, "Well, I certainly don't know anything in detail. I know that you were one of about a dozen men who are said to have planned the coup with President Barï¿½. I know that you're one of that group, but I don't know anything about what you did beyond that." He looked at me, and he said, "Well, this time we're going to do it right." What he meant by that and what he explained was, "This time we really are going to have free and fair elections. We really are going to turn the government over to a new group of capable civilians who can lead this country in the right direction." In fact, that's what happened.

The assassination was April. He announced quickly that by January 1, 2000 the government would be back in civilian hands. In fact, they had elections in November of '99. They welcomed observers. Observers came. Elections were honestly conducted. The victor was Tandja Mamadou who's the current president. I was no longer there. I left probably in August before the elections took place, but I must say Major Wankï¿½ and the group that acted with him in 1999 did carry out their promise.

Tandja Mamadou was another story. I had gotten to know him since he was head of one of the most important political parties, and it was one of the parties in opposition to President Barï¿½. He was elected to that five year term under their new constitution. He was reelected in 2004 to a second five year term. According to the constitution, that's all he could have, but as you may know from the papers in 2009 he first abolished the national assembly, and I think he might have abolished the supreme court as well. I'm a little unsure of the details. He had a national referendum to amend the constitution so that he could run again and again. That happened.

He is now in his third term. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) said they no longer recognize him as president. We have, once again, announced that the AID programs that we were carrying on from outside of the country, administered mostly from Bamako, I think, that these will be suspended because he's used extra-constitutional means to carry on as the leader. It's hard to understand why he'd do this except he's a very stubborn and a strong-willed man. I knew that all along. I'm sorry he has this short-term vision for what's best for his country.

I should say that during my time under President Barï¿½, I was always able to meet with the leaders of the variety of political parties that existed. The president who was overthrown, President Ousmane, was a man I could call on anytime I wanted. Early in my time he was under house arrest, but later they lifted that. It was a curious mixture. It was a government that had come to power illegally, but nevertheless let a lot of things continue to function as they had in the past. Political parties were quite active. They were harassed, there were measures taken to make their work more difficult. Journalists were arrested for things they wrote, but they rarely closed down papers. Maybe they would suspend a paper for a short time. They set fire to the presses of one.

A lot of what you might call normal political activity continued to flourish, and I could talk to just about anyone I wanted to. I could always see any government official anytime, and they were so eager to earn the good will of the United States that I always had to be sure I was ready for an appointment before I requested it because they might say, "Come now," or, "Could you come at 2:00?" That was true at any level, even the president. If I wanted to see the president, I better be ready before I pick up the phone and make the request because they might just say, "He'll see you in an hour." Of course, Washington didn't really want to hear that. They thought I should be keeping arm's length, and I never really understood where that was going to lead us.

Q: There is this attitude that you alluded to. How did you find life in Niger?

CECIL: Poverty is pervasive. You develop a kind of callousness, like many of us who have served in a third world, in poor countries, I think. It's like working in an emergency room in a hospital. After a while blood doesn't bother you. That's how you learn to live with poverty all around you. You do what you can with people you come in contact with to help them, members of your household staff for instance, embassy employee family members. You do what you can where you have an opportunity to support programs that will have a wider social impact. You do that, too.

The level of crime was not high. We were relatively secure. We did have a regional security officer in the embassy, but I didn't have an armed guard or anything like that. There was no concern at that point. Of course while we were there, the embassies in Dar Es Salaam and Nairobi were attacked by al-Qaeda, so we were always conscious of the potential security threat, but there was nothing that made me or members of my embassy ever feel that we were personally in danger. As I said earlier, we traveled a lot.

The main problem when you travel was the bandits, not terrorists or people doing things for political motivation, but just robbers out on the road wanting to take your money or your vehicle. After I left we had a death. A military person-I believe he was a member of the office overseeing the Marine security guard detachment, but it was someone who had arrived after I had left-was killed when he tried to stop a carjacking at night at a bar in town, but again, it was robbery, not politically motivated.

Q: You left there in 1999?

CECIL: '99. It was a very stimulating three-year assignment despite the contentious relationship with the African bureau front office. Like everything else in the Foreign Service, it was an education.

Q: Then what?

CECIL: I came to the Board of Examiners (BEX), and I worked on the Board giving oral exams to candidates who had successfully passed the written exam to enter the Foreign Service. I did that for two years.

Q: What was your impression of the exam process and of the candidates?

CECIL: When I arrived we were still in the era when it was a totally "blind" exam. That means the examiners knew nothing about the candidates when they interviewed them. We were not allowed to see their applications or their files. The feeling in those days was that this was the way to ensure total objectivity to get away from the image of the early years of the Foreign Service, when it was alleged that ivy league graduates were favored. That's how it was when I started.

During my time there the process changed, and we moved to a process where we did have the opportunity to examine candidates' files in the course of the day so that our questions could be somewhat more focused on their past experience. That was because there were a number of cases where people who failed the oral protested either to the Director General or the Foreign Service or some went to their congressmen and senators and protested and said, "I've got such wonderful overseas experience. These are all the things I've done. Look at this list." Sometimes you have to say, "Gee, well that's pretty impressive. Wonder why he didn't pass the exam?" The pendulum swung to the other side and we began to know more about the candidates.

Candidates were always... Well, I won't say always, but certainly those who passed passed because they demonstrated their ability to be imaginative, to be quick to respond to the challenges we would toss at them, a lot of role playing, a lot of imaginary-scenario questions that they would have to deal with on the spot. The best and the brightest, to take an old phrase. Candidates were not always young of course.

If there is such a thing as a typical candidate, they had already been out of college anywhere from two to 10 years and had had good experience in the private sector, a lot of it overseas. We also had another group who would be retired military officers coming in in their mid- to late-40s wanting to find a second career in the Foreign Service. Some of them were good, and some of them were not so good. It's America, so we found all kinds. You could come up to age 59. The rule was that you had to be in the service five years to be vested in the retirement program, and since we had mandatory retirement at age 65 you had to be on duty before your 60th birthday. We had occasional candidates in their late 50s.

I thought it was a pretty good process. I haven't been associated with it since March of 2006. After I retired at the end of 2001 I did examine as a WAE employee, a retired part- time examiner, several months a year until March of 2006. I haven't been associated with it since they moved now to where the exams are given on computers several times a year. In my time they were only given once a year. There was a time there I think where they did it twice in one year, but usually it was only once a year.

I did that for two years, until November 2001 when I decided to retire. I had actually asked, earlier, to stay a third year in BEX and my office director had accepted that, but as I got into the summer of 2001 I began to feel that if I was serious about trying to turn photography into a second career that I needed to get started on it. My intention was to take educational-type photos of Third World cultures, especially Islamic culture, which would be of use to textbook publishers, to help educate Americans about the Third World. I also like to write and occasionally would write an article which I would illustrate with my own photos. So I decided that while I was still in good health and able to travel abroad I should get started at it, rather than wait another year. I did, however, maintain my eligibility as a WAE employee ("When Actually Employed", meaning you get paid on an hourly basis, with no other benefits) on a part-time basis so that I could continue to work as an examiner up to about five months a year if BEX had need of examiners beyond those assigned full-time to the office. About this same time Colin Powell announced his "Diplomatic Readiness Initiative" to increase hiring to make up for the attrition in the Foreign Service that had taken place during the 1990s. This actually doubled our intake rate. The 24 full-time examiners were not able to handle this, so I actually had many opportunities to work several weeks at a time around the country giving the oral exam. I spent two or three weeks at a time in San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, New Orleans, Ft. Lauderdale, and Houston. Except for San Francisco I had never visited any of those other cities, so it was a great opportunity for me to get to know parts of the U.S. for the first time. I continued to do oral exams until March of 2006. In the fall of 2006 a friend told me that the Department, due to the illness of our chargï¿½ d'affaires in Tripoli, Libya, suddenly needed a new chargï¿½ for a few months. Before I knew it I was on my way to Tripoli. Let's talk about that next time.

Cecil, File 10

LIBYA

Q: Today is the 19th of December 2008, and this is one of a continuing series of interviews I'm doing with Chuck Cecil. Today we're going to concentrate on the time that your were chargï¿½ in Libya. We'll move back to where we left off before.

Q: Chuck, do you want to tell how you ended up in Libya and then we'll talk about Libya.

CECIL: The period that we're going to be talking about is specifically November 15th, 2006 until July 6th, 2007. For one week short of eight months I was chargï¿½ there. I think for the reader or the listener, I should briefly sketch some of the important historical points that led to our re-opening in Libya and led to my going. Probably the starting point would be in April of 1999 when Libya turned over the two suspects in the Lockerbie Pan Am 103 bombing case. They were transferred to a Scottish court in the Netherlands for trial. Then in October of 2001 the United States and the UK began meetings with Libyan officials to ensure that Libya would comply with international-that is, UN Security Council resolutions-regarding terrorism.

In August of 2003 Libya did accept responsibility for the actions of its officials in the Pan Am 103 bombing. It set up an escrow fund to compensate the families of the victims. Because of that, in September 2003 the Security Council lifted the sanctions on Libya and Pan Am 103 families began to receive money from the escrow account.

On December 19, 2003 to be specific, Libya announced its intention to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction (it had a rudimentary nuclear research program, and a program to weaponize chemical agents) and to give up missiles that it had, to bring itself into compliance with an international missile control regime. Libya announced that it would turn its missiles over to the west or dismantle them.

On February 8, 2004 the United States reopened an interest section in Tripoli under the Belgian flag. Later in February of that month we announced the lifting of our travel ban on travel to Libya. We allowed companies to once again do business in Libya. We invited Libya to open an interest section in Washington. It was really the beginning of the return to substantive relationships.

I'm trying to skip some of the points and will let the real student of Libya go into other sources. I just want to hit highlights here.

On June 28, 2004 we officially opened our own U.S. liaison office in Tripoli, no longer under the Belgian flag in other words. That was the resumption of our own direct diplomatic presence. On May 31st, 2006 the U.S. liaison office was upgraded to an embassy. Our first chargï¿½ was an officer named Greg Berry. The embassy had been functioning for almost two and a half years when I arrived. The reason I went was that Mr. Berry fell ill and was not able to finish his assignment, and the Department suddenly wanted someone else, a senior officer, to take over the post. I arrived on November 16th, 2006. Greg Berry left in October. There was a short gap between his departure and my arrival.

As we talk about the following eight months I think the issues fall generally into two categories. One I would call administrative issues. There were quite a few administrative or management issues that I needed to be involved in. Then there was a group of policy issues that I played some role in although I would say that throughout all this period David Welch, our Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs was the real action officer on the important policy issues with Libya. He was a combination chargï¿½ d'faires/super desk officer back here in Washington because the Libyans trusted him. They had tremendous confidence in him, and he was able during my time and the following year and a half ultimately to achieve real progress on some of the most difficult issues. I would always give David Welch the primary credit for the progress we made in our relations with Libya during 2006, 2007, and 2008.

Let's talk about the admin issues for a moment. Let's start with just a few words about sending a person like myself, a retired officer who returned to work as what we call a WAE, a person who gets paid when actually employed. You get paid by the hour with no other benefits. There are some limitations on this kind of service. There are salary caps. A retired officer is not allowed to earn over a certain amount of money in any single year or his pension is reduced. This can be waived by the Director General, and in my case the Director General did waive it so that I did not have to leave Tripoli when I reached my salary cap.

There's another ceiling, however, a ceiling of 1,040 hours of work a year. That's six months of a year. Although I think the issue is debatable, the common practice is that the Department, the DG, does not seek a waiver to the 1,040 hour limitation. I've read the code of federal regulations very closely on that point, and I do believe that the DG does have the authority to request from OPM a waiver, but as far as I know, the conventional knowledge is he's apparently never done so. When I eventually left Tripoli the following July it was because I had reached my 1,040 hour ceiling-actually exceeded it by a bit.

Shortly after I got to Tripoli, I did list some goals and objectives in an email that I sent to Gordon Gray. Gordon was the deputy assistant secretary in the Near East bureau who was responsible for overseeing North Africa, so he was my immediate boss. I will share some of those goals and objectives with you. I certainly didn't achieve them all, but when I arrived and after I'd been there about two weeks, they seemed to me to be the types of objectives I should be working toward.

When I arrived the embassy was housed in the only five-star hotel in Tripoli, a hotel called the Corinthia. We occupied four complete floors in that hotel. Forty rooms. It was extremely vulnerable from a security point of view. A circular driveway went past the main entrance. When I arrived there was absolutely nothing that would prevent a car or a truck from driving up the circular driveway and detonating itself right in front of the main entrance. Although we were on fifth through the eighth floors we would certainly have taken the brunt of any such car bomb or truck bomb. Around the first of the year the hotel management with lots of prodding and pushing from us did finally install those kinds of bollards that go down into the ground and rise up. Most the time they're supposed to be up. That did provide a little bit of control, but the management of those bollards really left something to be desired.

One of our objectives was to move out of the hotel. Another agency in the government had already found property elsewhere in town about a 20 to 25 minute drive from the hotel, and they had rented a couple of villas and set up their operations there. There were other unoccupied villas adjacent to those occupied, so we set out to rent, lease, long-term lease, the other villas.

One of my objectives was to do everything I could to speed up that process, get us out of the hotel, and get us into the villa compound as we called it. The houses were situated in such a way that there already were walls around them or with just a little addition we could surround the whole group. It was seven villas in all we wanted. We could turn it into a small compound, and we hoped to operate from there for the period of several years that it would take to find land which was another objective on my list: Find land and buy it and build a permanent chancery.

Q: What was happening business-wise, property-wise, in Tripoli at the time?

CECIL: First of all it would be a real estate agent's dream. Property values were zooming up because with the lifting of UN sanctions and our own sanctions, Libya was once again able to participate in the global economy. Lots and lots of companies were coming, opening offices, needing residences for their people. New embassies were also opening, so there was a lot of demand for property that would be suitable for a diplomatic establishment. Libya had a special problem in that earlier during the revolution, I can't remember whether it was in the '70s or '80s, at some point all property was nationalized.

Also, coincidentally I suppose, there was a fire in the municipality headquarters building, and all property titles were destroyed in the fire, so proving ownership to a piece of property was a special problem in Tripoli. It gave many, many opportunities for graft and corruption if you had to deal with the municipal authorities to try to get some documentation that would give you the right to either rent or sell your property. This could be a very long and frustrating and difficult process.

I was told during my time there that the French had been looking for three years for a site to buy to build a chancery on, and they finally gave up. They simply just gave up and said, "We'll just stay where we are. We'll make improvements where we can, but this process is leading us nowhere. The British were looking for a permanent site. They rented offices in the other important building in town, a very tall building full of commercial offices, but it too was vulnerable from a security standpoint, and they were not comfortable there.

The British ambassador there did most of his work out of his residence, and a few of their offices were in that residence. The residence had been the property of the wife of King Idris, the king overthrown by Qadhafi in 1969. The ability of the British to remain in that residence was always somewhat precarious. The ambassador was somewhat concerned about how long they would be able to continue to rent the facility. The queen I'm pretty sure was dead, and money was going, I guess, to her heirs, so the British were also looking. Everybody was looking for some way to improve their physical facilities, and it was an extremely difficult search.

Another item on my list was to find a residence for our new ambassador who we thought would be coming relatively soon. The house that Greg Berry occupied and that I moved into was a 45-minute drive from the Corinthia Hotel. It's hard for me in looking at the situation, and I ask people, it's hard for me to understand why that house was chosen so far away, and I never got a good answer to that. In any case, it was clear that it wasn't a practical location for a new ambassador's residence.

Q: Also make more vulnerable for whoever's ambassador being waylaid.

CECIL: It was out in the country. That's right. Other diplomats made fun of me being out with the sheep and the goats. It was literally true. A shepherd was grazing his sheep on a plot of land just almost in front of my house. It was a terrible waste of time, the commute. I said 45 minutes. It could be worse if traffic was bad, but even in the best of times you couldn't do it in less than 40 minutes.

We were looking for a house for the ambassador. A general services officer who was with us TDY for several months undertook the task. She visited and walked through 50 houses over the course of two or three months. Of the 50 she found five that might be suitable but really only three of the five were close to what we needed. Finding a setback was a big problem. Tripoli is a rather congested city, and there aren't a lot of houses that offer both some setback from the street and also that offer some opportunity for parking because you do have to have a place for visitors to put their cars, especially if you're having dinners or receptions for more than a handful of people.

Finding a good residence was a long, time consuming job, but in the end just about the time I left we did finally successfully lease a property, and that will be the residence of the new ambassador who was sworn in, I should say, this week, Wednesday. We can go into a little bit later the reasons why this took so long.

When I went out in November 2006 we thought we'd have a new ambassador there in a few months, probably by April because I had agreed to stay six months. I presented a request for agrï¿½ment for our ambassador on January 24, 2007. We all thought that the Libyans would be so anxious to have an American ambassador back in town, the first time since 1972, that we anticipated a quick turnaround on the agrï¿½ment question. In fact, we finally received agrï¿½ment on July 8, as you can see, more than five months later.

Why it took so long is a fascinating question. We don't really know. We were told repeatedly that it would just be a short time, "just another week or two, and you'll have the answer," but it's an example of the fact that nothing important happens in Libya without Muammar Qadhafi's agreement. There are many delays associated with getting .Qadhafi's agreement. Sometimes people don't want to put the questions in front of him. Sometimes he doesn't want to make a decision, so long delays can result. This was the first request for agrï¿½ment for an American ambassador that Qadhafi ever had to face. He came to power on September 2, 1969. Our current ambassador remained until 1972, then we had four chargï¿½s after that, taking us up to 1980.

We finally because of the increasing deterioration in our relationship and the fact that our embassy was attacked and burned, we finally closed in 1980. So this was the first time Qadhafi had been asked to agree to receive an American ambassador, and maybe it was a psychological step that was difficult for him to take. I don't know, but there are some thoughts along those lines. Instead of coming home in April, in the end I agreed to stay until our national day of reception on July 4.

[Excerpt #1]

I officially relinquished the chargï¿½ship on July 6 to Christ Stevens who had arrived on June 26 to be the new DCM, so he was actually the chargï¿½ on July 8 when he was called in. I was still in the country. I was taking a few days to pack up before leaving. Chris was called in on July 8 to the foreign ministry and was given agrï¿½ment for Gene Cretz. I felt sort of like Jimmy Carter must have felt when our hostages in Iran were released on January 20 just as Ronald Reagan was sworn in. I couldn't help but think of that.

[Excerpt #2]

Q: Have any other major countries cut off relations with Libya?

CECIL: I don't know the number, but it included the United Kingdom. Britain had reopened about three years ahead of us, however, in probably I'm guessing around 2001 or 2, but they had been absent for many years before that.

Q: Had they had some of the same problems or were__ ?

CECIL: I think we had more problems than almost anyone else. During Greg Berry's chargï¿½ship there were a number of senators and congressmen who visited Tripoli including Senator Biden. I'm not sure if it was Senator Biden who was told this. It may have been another senator, but people were talking about this when I arrived. One of our congressional visitors had a meeting with Qadhafi. Several did, but I mean in this particular case. In this meeting Qadhafi said to the senator that he wasn't sure he wanted a large American embassy in Tripoli interfering in Libyan politics and affairs "the way you do in Cairo." President Mubarak is a frequent visitor to Tripoli, and I suspect on one occasion President Mubarak had complained to Qadhafi about these Americans always pressuring us on human rights issues and democracy and elections. Maybe Qadhafi thought, "I don't want that."

We think that may have been responsible in part for the great difficulty we had finding a suitable piece of land. The government clearly could take a political decision to cut through all the paperwork, the absence of titles and so on, and lots of zoning regulations. They could clearly facilitate our finding a piece of land and buying it, but they did not do anything during my time to speed up that process. If they had wanted to help us they could have done so in the blink of an eye.

We were with goals and objectives for Gordon Gray. The second item on my list actually was to do what I could to create or maintain high morale. When I was being briefed in Washington in November prior to going out, I was told that of the 22 American positions on our staff in Tripoli ten incumbents-10 officers-had curtailed in the previous 12 months. That's a tremendous percentage of curtailments at post. Almost half in other words in the preceding 12 months, so I was asked to please try to do something to improve the morale out there and try to create conditions under which the staff would fulfill their tours.

The reasons for the curtailments were varied. Of the 10 my recollection is that I was told that five were for medical reasons and some of those are obviously beyond anyone's control, but medical is also a term that includes psychological reasons, stress, tension, and that is sometimes used to terminate or curtail a tour. Maybe we made some improvements during my time, but we didn't completely solve the problem. During my eight months we had two additional curtailments. Our budget and fiscal/human resources officer curtailed after being there about three months because she decided she would rather go to Baghdad than stay in Tripoli. Of course volunteering for Baghdad was an immediate exit from many posts in the world, so if you're unhappy for whatever reason, you go to Baghdad.

Q: Chuck, Tripoli doesn't strike me as a particularly bad assignment. There are other places where people are shooting at you or you're terribly constrained. It's a pretty place, it's...

CECIL: It is. Let me talk about the difficulties of life in Tripoli, but first let me say the other curtailment that occurred during my time was our regional security officer whose wife was the subject of some harassment in town by Libyans. Young Libyan men followed her in her vehicle, and there was at least one clear incident where she was extremely uncomfortable. They never touched her, but nevertheless she was very uncomfortable, and the RSO felt that for the safety of his wife, he needed to curtail. He's the RSO, the one we call upon to determine the risk involved in living in places like Libya. It was difficult to counter his arguments, and he felt very strongly about it, so he curtailed.

The difficulties of life in Tripoli varied depending on whether you can read and speak Arabic or not. For those who can't read or speak Arabic life is much more difficult. For many years since the 1970s all the road signs, to give you an example, in Libya are in Arabic only. Qadhafi believed that Arabic was the perfect language, God's language, and there was no need for any other language to be used in public. If you are trying to read a road sign and you can't read the Arabic alphabet even much less pronounce it, it's difficult. If you go out of Tripoli onto the highways of the country and you want to go somewhere-and there are some interesting places to go-but if you come to an intersection, and you're faced with a bunch of road signs in Arabic and you can't read them, it's very frustrating. You have to have very clear directions before you go anywhere, and just to find your way home in town, you have to memorize the route because you can't read the street names. So that's difficult.

Libya is an absolute police state. Not every member of the embassy is followed, but certain members are. We know that all the phones are listened to, and emails are monitored, so there is a lack of privacy. That can get on people. Again, if you don't speak the language, there is almost nothing in the way of recreational or cultural diversion. There are beaches, but those near Tripoli are often polluted because the sewage disposal system is not modern. There are archaeological sites and ruins-Greek, Roman, Byzantine-wonderful ruins around the country. There is an organization called the Tripoli Archaeological Society that organizes monthly field trips to these places. If you have those interests, that's a great outlet, but not everybody is interested in archeology or history, and how many times do you want to visit the same ruin? There are no bars, no movies, very few places to go if you wanted to hear a musical performance, and if you did go to hear one it would be Arab music. It wouldn't be Western. The diversions are few and far between.

The climate isn't all that bad. It's a Mediterranean climate, but it does get very, very hot in the summer, and there is the hot wind from the desert that comes up several months a year. Many people find life there difficult. The Libyan government is hard to work with. As I said earlier, it's hard to get decisions. It's very difficult to get visas for American visitors. The government does not always facilitate that, so an officer in the embassy can make all the arrangements, set up a program for visitors from Washington or from some other post, and at the last minute the person doesn't get their visa, so all your work is for naught. That's frustrating. Sometimes we would have to plan entire programs for officers two or three or even literally four times before the officer would ever get there. It was frustrating.

If you're an Arabist there's a lot to keep you busy and occupied, and the Arabists by and large tend to be quite happy in Tripoli. The dialect is not that difficult to understand. It's not like the Algerian or Moroccan Arabic. It's an interesting society and culture, and the Libyans themselves are very welcoming to Americans. I was quite surprised at the absence of any hostility, no references to the Iraq war. I think the Libyans were just too polite to ever raise it. When people would learn that I was an American, even without having any idea what my job was, they would say, "Welcome! Welcome to Libya! It's so nice to have you here!" People who speak Arabic can find a lot of cultural attractions and a lot of opportunities to improve the language. It's easier for them to travel. I think the difficulties of morale differ greatly between those two categories: those who know the language and those who don't.

What else? Back to property questions. Another administrative issue on my To Do list. We still owned property from prior to our departure in 1980. We owned an ambassador's residence. We owned our embassy building, the one that was burned. It was still standing, a tall multi-story commercial office building in downtown Tripoli, not on a main street, one block up from a main street, but still sitting there today, a burnt out shell. Not totally burned out but quite thoroughly burned but still standing structurally. Sound apparently. We had the chancery, we had the residence. We had a staff residence building where we had six apartments that our staff had occupied prior to 1980. That was livable again and, in fact, it was occupied by members of the local staff, I believe, of the Belgian embassy , and we received a small amount of rent from them for that. We had four other private residences that we had owned in the '70s. A couple of those had been torn down and new property had been built on the land, but a couple were still there. In any case the important ones were the chancery and the ambassador's residence.

The Turkish government wanted to buy the ambassador's residence from us because their embassy was on the piece of land next door. They wanted to tear down the residence and build a consular office building on that site.

The Turkish government would not proceed until we could produce title to show that we actually owned the land and had the right to sell it. We had our documentation. We had bought it from an Italian owner in 1952, but we needed some kind of Libyan document from the municipality. The Libyans would not assist us in getting that. That's a case where they could have done it in a week if they had wanted to, but obviously they didn't want to help us. The same was true for the chancery. There were Libyan businessmen who expressed an interest in acquiring the property, but once again we couldn't get the title we needed, so that was kind of a frustrating issue.

Our old ambassador's residence was lived in by squatters and once again the Libyan government said, "We'll get them out if you can show us that you really own that property." Again, we couldn't satisfy them.

Other items on my To Do list were to cultivate a broad circle of Libyans, try to learn anything I could about the country and the people, obviously part of my own education. I also wanted to travel outside Tripoli as much as I possibly could to increase my knowledge of the country. It's always been my feeling that you don't learn a whole lot, or you quickly reach your limits, if you just stay in the capital. You have to travel around the country and talk to the local people and local officials, so I wanted to do as much of that as I could, and I was able to do quite a bit, actually.

I was looking for ways to expand our public diplomacy activities to remove obstacles that were currently impeding our access to the universities and people in the cultural areas. There was enough there to keep me busy. As we'll see in some cases I got something done, and in other cases I ran up against a brick wall.

I might say another word or two as we're on this administrative side, one aspect of living in Tripoli. I mentioned surveillance. I was under constant surveillance 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There was always a car with two Libyans from what's called the "external security organization." That's the intelligence agency that oversees foreign intelligence gathering and diplomatic activities. They were always with me. When I went home at night their car was parked by my front gate. They slept in their car. I couldn't go anywhere without their knowledge.

[Excerpt #3]

On the other hand, photography is my hobby, and I would spend my weekends taking pictures in Tripoli, or I would be making a trip out into the countryside or even when I went with the Tripoli Archaeological Society in their group-organized tours on a big bus, my security guys were in a car right behind the bus following me every step of the way. Sometimes it actually helped me take photos. If there were people in the way and I was waiting for them to move, my security guys would go up and shoo them out of the way, even though I would never request such a thing. "Get out of the photo!" That's an interesting side note. Before I arrived in Tripoli, I thought this will be a difficult country to take pictures in. They'll be hypersensitive, and I'll really have to watch it. It was the exact opposite. In eight months I never had any... Well, there was one case and that was probably an aberration, so I had one case which probably isn't even worth talking about where somebody protested about my taking a picture. The security guards didn't care at all what I took a picture of, so that was quite a surprise to me.

Another item on my To Do list was the opening of a full service visa section to issue visas to Libyans. We were not issuing visas to Libyans when I arrived. Libyans had to travel to Tunis to make their application, and then they would have to go home and return many weeks later-the average was six weeks later-to pick up their visa. The long and slow clearance process that we had in Washington resulted in those long time delays. Libyan law prohibited the mailing in the international mail of Libyan passports, so they couldn't go just once and apply for the visa and have it mailed to them in Tripoli. They had to go back and pick it up, so two airplane trips, and it always required an overnight because of airplane schedules.

This was a great irritant to the Libyan government. Even in such cases as official visitors, that is, international visitors invited by our public diplomacy program, if we were inviting Libyans to participate in some program here in the States, even they had to go to Tunis for their visa. We included travel money in their grants, so we were paying for that trip. It was costing the U.S. government to send invited Libyan guests to Tunis to get their visas.

During my time we liberalized that a bit. We did reach the point where official visitors traveling on official Libyan government business could come to us with a diplomatic note from the foreign ministry stating the purpose of the visit. We would grant those visas in our embassy, and we would do that because in those cases we did not require personal appearance. In other cases, that is, any Libyan businessman, any private individual who wanted to go to the States for any reason, the regulations required a personal appearance in front of the consul.

The law also requires that we protect our consuls, and normally we have what we call "hard lines" in our consulates-that is, walls and bullet proof glass that would prevent a disgruntled applicant or a terrorist for that matter from shooting the consul through the window or setting off a little bomb. I'm sure in the case of a big bomb it wouldn't help. We have to protect our consults with strong reinforced physical walls and windows.

We couldn't do that in the Corinthia Hotel. Even the villas that we subsequently rented were all built to be private residences. They weren't built to be offices, so they didn't have the reinforced walls, structures, that a consular section required. I thought when I had my talks in Washington in November that we would be able to achieve the move of the consular section from the hotel to the villas probably by April-my initial estimate-and we would be able to open our doors and start providing consular services. This was part of the reason why it's so difficult for Americans to get visas. The Libyans were simply engaging in reciprocity. If we didn't give them visas easily, they weren't going to give us visas easily. Their procedures were even more unpredictable than ours.

That did not happen.. We did not move by April. It's a very disappointing story of what I would consider the slowness of Washington to respond to the needs of a post, the failure to attach the importance to the issue that it merited despite the fact I sent in a long cable with all of the reasons why we needed to start offering full visa services in Tripoli. The OBO, Overseas Building Operations, that handles our construction overseas, they did not want to invest any money in a temporary facility, a villa that we were only going to occupy for two or three years. The Near East bureau didn't seem to want to engage in this. They seemed to value their relations with OBO more than they valued their relations with the Libyan government. I'm sure that the bureau did have many other issues with OBO, issues in other parts of the region such as Iraq and elsewhere where they needed OBO cooperation, so I think we were just sacrificed on the altar of expediency, and no one in Washington really went to bat to get the money required to prepare the villa so we could offer full consular services.

Since I left there has been some gradual improvement in that. I understand that we have since moved the consular section into the ambassador's residence that we found-which the new ambassador wound up not using anyway. While I understand we aren't yet receiving what I'll call the man in the street, the businessman or the private citizen, they tell me that in a few months we will be moved into these villas about two years later than I hoped, and we'll start full visa services in Tripoli.

Q: One time, this is before all the trouble started with Libya, Libyan students were one of the mainstays of our universities. How stood that during your time?

CECIL: What you say is certainly true. There were thousands of Libyans who studied in the States, and you still find them. They're almost all, of course, over 50 years old. Every one of them that I met has very fond memories of his time in the States. They speak good English, and they long to see the restoration of a normal relationship between the U.S. and Libya. Then there's a huge gap, a whole generation, which doesn't know the United states at all, which doesn't speak English, and one of our problems is this is the generation that's now rising into senior positions as the Libyans who are 50 and older-and many of them are 60 and older-as they retire and leave government. They're being replaced by younger Libyans who don't speak or read English, so we have a tremendous amount of catch-up work there in enabling this whole generation to acquire English language capabilities.

We were just beginning to launch again an effort to bring Libyans to the States for university study. I now forget the exact number during my time, but I think it was this: I believe that in 2006 we had about 60 Libyans back in the States for university study. In 2007 we had about 120. I was just at a Libyan panel discussion early this week to brief Gene Cretz, the new ambassador. One of the people from the State Department there said we now have 1,170 Libyans in the country as of right now back in university studies. Clearly we are making great progress toward restoring our relationship.

There was a temporary blip when in March of 2007 Muammar Qadhafi gave a public speech in which he made a very interesting statement. He said, speaking to the parents of young Libyans, he said, "If you send your children to the United States or to England for university studies, 50% of them will be recruited as agents to come back and work against our country's interests." In other words, they'll be recruited to be spies.

That had a pretty chilling effect on the idea of sending your kid outside the country to study. I think that that speech was one reason why I was always denied permission to set foot on a university campus. In March of 2007 shortly after that speech as it happened... Of course, we didn't know the speech was going to be made, but shortly after it was made, I asked to travel to Eastern Libya, to Cyrenaica to visit several cities there and also to see the Greek ruins. I wanted to go to the universities in the towns of Bayda and Derna and Benghazi, which is the biggest city of the East. I was going with the PAO, and the defense attachï¿½ was traveling with me also, but he had proposed military meetings that he wanted to have.

The PAO and I said we wanted to visit the universities so we could meet with the deans and faculty members to explain to them what we could offer in the way of English learning opportunities. We wanted to describe the Fulbright Fellowship program to them in both directions, Libyans going to the States, Americans coming to Libya to study. I even offered to spend an hour with any English language class where the teacher might like to expose his or her students to an American accent. I said, "I'll talk about anything you want. It doesn't have to be politics or foreign policy. I'll just talk about life in America. I'll do it in English."

We were explicitly denied permission to visit any of the three universities, and I think it's in large part because of that speech, but maybe there was even a deeper reservoir of hesitancy. If you're a government official in Libya, you don't want to take a chance on anything that might displease The Leader. Of course, all university faculty are government officials. There are no private universities in Libya.

I guess the speech like so many other Qadhafi speeches has now been forgotten or relegated to the past. Clearly we're making great progress in restoring the numbers. I guess it'll continue to increase.

I think that's a pretty comprehensive survey of what I called the administrative issues. Maybe we should turn now to what I would call the policy issues.

Q: Okey doke. Policy.

CECIL: As I said earlier David Welch was the real action officer on the important policy issues. He was the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern affairs, a real Arabist, a real professional. I made whatever contribution I could. Often our role, frankly speaking, was to arrange meetings. David would sometimes come to Tripoli. Other times he would meet senior Libyan officials in Europe at their mutual convenience either in Rome or in London. Those were frequent meeting places. Sometimes we were just facilitators, but it takes a lot of facilitations sometimes to make a meeting happen. We might exchange papers or thoughts before the actual meeting to try to figure out what could be achieved, that sort of thing. I certainly couldn't claim any leadership role during this period, but more a facilitating role.

One of the first issues that I encountered shortly after I arrived was the question of follow-up to the disposal of the weapons of mass destruction even though those talks, the breakthroughs, had been back 2003. Nevertheless, there was still a lot of implementation that still needed to happen, so we were still talking about that with the Libyans. There was a mechanism. The acronym was TSCC. I know that's Trilateral Security, and I'm not sure what the next C stands for, but I think Trilateral Security something Commission, U.S.-UK-Libya. That group would meet from time to time. Only two weeks after I arrived in Tripoli, I found myself on the way to London to participate in talks in London that took place on November 28. From Washington had come Under Secretary Robert Joseph. I forget his exact title, but it's probably under secretary for arms control and compliance, something like that. He came with a team of other people from his bureau. We had a number of issues to talk about.

The Libyans sent several members, General Mohammad Azway. A-z-w-a-y is one way it's sometimes spelled. He was the point of contact for military issues. The defense attaches all talked to him. If I had a military issue, I went to see him. The Libyans like to centralize the contact points. They don't want you running all over their government. They want to know who you're talking to, and they control it that way. General Azway came. Abdulati al-Obidi. I'll say more about him later. That's often spelled O-b-i-d-i. That's how he spells it on his calling card. Sometimes it's spelled O-b-e-i-d-i.

Abdulati al-Obidi is one of the few trusted confidantes of Muammar Qadhafi. His current position is assistant secretary for European affairs in the foreign ministry, but his role and his importance are much more than that. He attended, and the Libyan ambassador to London, and some others that I would call technical experts from the Libyan government.

One of the issues we talked about was the Libyan tardiness in disposing of their yellow cake which they had a quantity of that they had bought many years earlier when they had an active intention of pursuing nuclear enrichment.

Q: Is this in Niger?

CECIL: I believe they did buy some from Niger, and I'm not sure if they bought it from other places as well, but certainly Niger is nearby and does have yellow cake to the south. The Libyans should have disposed of this earlier, and we were prodding them. Their answer was always that they were studying the market, they want to get the best price, there are problems with transporting it, we have a French firm coming next week to inspect it. They always have a reason for why they haven't acted yet. I wonder if they've disposed of it even today, but hopefully they have.

[Excerpt #4]

Another issue we talked about in London was the disposal of Libya's chemical weapons. They had a stockpile which they had agreed to give up, to destroy them, which required the construction of a special incinerator designed specially for these particular chemical weapons. We agreed to provide $45,000,000 to design and construct that incinerator in Libya. The Libyans were to provide $13,000,000 in local costs: transport costs, labor costs, local construction costs. We discussed that in November in London. The agreement with the U.S. was finally signed in late January or early February.

After signing the bilateral U.S.-Libyan agreement, then the Libyans were to negotiate the detailed contract with a company that we had selected, but after a few weeks the Libyans came back to us, and they said they really didn't want to pay the $13,000,000 in domestic costs. They thought we should pay that, too. Washington was very firm on that. They said, "Nothing doing. First of all, a deal's a deal. We've talked about all these points before, and you do have some obligation to pay local costs." The Libyans said, "In that case, we're going to cancel the agreement. We'll just talk to the company on our own without your money, and we'll do it the way we want." And they did. Giving up $45,000,000 is remarkable because so many other times the Libyans were looking with their hat in hand. Why would an oil producer with over $40,000,000,000 in reserves at that time act like that? Now two years later they have over $100,000,000,000 in reserves, but they're always looking for a handout.

[Excerpt #5]

An often repeated theme that we heard in London, and I heard it many times in Tripoli, and David Welch heard it many times wherever he met with Libyan officials, was the question, "What did we get for giving up our weapons of mass destruction?" The Libyan officials maintain they need something clear and conspicuous to point to for the Libyan people. We often said, "One of the benefits you got is you're now re-entering the world stage." People like Tony Blair are actually visiting Tripoli-he had done so-and other world leaders were beginning to visit Tripoli or to invite Muammar Qadhafi to visit their capitals.

The embargos had been lifted, but this was never enough to satisfy the Libyans. They were always pressing for what they called "tangible rewards." They said, "Look at what you're offering North Korea in terms of fuel and food, and you've even made some offers to Iran. What are we getting? We look like we've been taken advantage of, made fools of." I'm sure they're repeating things that Muammar Qadhafi was feeling. He wasn't happy in retrospect with the deal, so it was a constant theme that we heard.

Another issue that we discussed in London was establishing a nuclear medicine center in Libya working under the IAEA. Libya had this vision of being a center to treat with nuclear medicine, treat people from all over Africa, and they wanted us and the UK to provide the funding. We said, "That would be difficult for us to justify politically. We'd be happy to work with you under the IAEA umbrella to see what we can do to establish such a medical center, but we're not in a position to provide any money for it." Under Secretary Joseph suggested that they sell the yellow cake and use the money from that!

Q: You were really back to the suq, weren't you?

CECIL: Very much so.

Q: The bazaar in Arabic terms.

CECIL: This was a good introduction for me to what it's like to negotiate with the Libyans and to participate in that. Those issues were handled more by Under Secretary Joseph's people in Washington than by the Near East bureau. It's a case there a very technical issue is handled outside the geographic bureau-more by the functional bureaus of the department. It was interesting, and our talks on various aspects went on over the following weeks and months that I was there.

Another issue that was very much on the agenda during my time was the Bulgarian nurses.

Q: Oh, yes.

CECIL: Our role in that was essentially a tangential one, but we were supportive, obviously, of the desire to secure the freedom of the Bulgarian nurses.

Q: Would you explain the background of the Bulgarian nurses?

CECIL: Right. There were I believe it was five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor employed by the Children's Hospital in Benghazi, Libya. At some point over 400 children were identified who had been infected with the AIDS virus, the HIV virus. All had been treated in this hospital. The Libyans came up with a conspiracy theory in which they blamed the Bulgarian nurses for intentionally infecting these 400 children, so they arrested them and the Palestinian as well, and held them. They were sentenced to death by the Libyan courts. Trials were held, yet the Libyans would not admit the testimony or evidence provided by Western experts.

A number of European experts studied the hospital and the evidence. One of the experts was the French, I forget his name. It's on the tip of my tongue, but the French doctor who discovered the HIV virus participated in this study. They all concluded that it was the sanitary practices of the hospital and the absence of effective blood screening measures that had led to the infection of the children.

I was actually visited during my time by an American Nobel Prize winner. It's terrible to say that I can't remember his name. I think he won the prize for chemistry if I recall, but he was involved with one of the committees working to secure the freedom of the Bulgarians. He actually visited me in the office in Tripoli, in the hotel. He said to me, the point he was trying to make to the Libyans was that they needn't feel any particular shame or guilt over this. When it occurred-around 2001 or 2002-blood screening measures weren't as good as they are today in 2007. It's not surprising if the Libyans didn't have the latest state-of-the-art blood screening technology in place, so the Libyans shouldn't feel so guilty. Rather than accept the blame or the responsibility, the Libyan approach was to blame the outsiders. Blame the foreigners.

A trial was held with very limited testimony provided by the Libyans. The nurses were sentenced to death as well as the Palestinian. There's a long history of legal actions. The case was sent to an appeals court. They reaffirmed the death sentence. When I arrived the case had gone from the appeals court to the supreme court, and the supreme court had referred it back to the appeals court for review, and we were waiting for the results of that review which were announced, I believe, on December 19th or 20th of 2006. This was mostly a European issue. All of the EU members were solidly behind Bulgaria which had just then been admitted to the EU, whereas when the case started, it was poor little Bulgaria trying to face up to Libya.

By joining the European Union Bulgaria acquired the support of the entire body in presenting its case. There was a very active committee and international series of discussions with Libya. The talks on the European side were headed by a man named Mark Perini. He had been the EU ambassador to Libya when these talks had started, and later he was transferred to Ankara, Turkey as EU ambassador, but he continued to carry this portfolio. From time to time Mark Perini would come back to Tripoli for talks with the Libyans, and there would be meetings with the UK ambassador, the Bulgarian ambassador, sometimes the German ambassador, and I was invited always.

Q: How about the French? Didn't they secure the release of the nurses?

CECIL: We'll talk about that at the end. That was a very curious and sudden development. During the meetings that I attended I only recall the French ambassador at the last meeting, and that would have been probably May or June of 2007. The French were not an active player in the early months in my participation in this.

We did have one sign of tangible engagement. We had proposed a memorandum of understanding between the Baylor University Medical School and the Children's Hospital in Benghazi. The U.S. government was providing the financing for that arrangement. A few hundred thousand dollars, I think. Not more than $400,000. It was a program under which Baylor would provide training and technical assistance to the Benghazi Children's Hospital. They would send people from Baylor to Benghazi occasionally, and I think there was also provision to bring Libyans back to the States. That was the demonstration of our support.

The Libyans delayed months and months signing that agreement. Again, it's one of those inexplicable things. We don't know why they didn't sign it quickly and move ahead, but anyway it took months and months.

Under the Libyan judicial system when the appeals court would issue its verdict on the, my notes say December 19, if they once again reaffirmed the death penalty the case would be reviewed by the Supreme Court. All death sentences in Libya must be reviewed by the supreme court. If the supreme court affirmed the death penalty, then there was a higher body above the supreme court called the Higher Judicial Council. As it was explained to us, the supreme court is the last legal review, but the Higher Judicial Council can review difficult cases in a broader context. They can take political considerations into account rather than solely legal ones, so we were always told that the Higher Judicial Council could overturn any death sentence that was issued.

During all of my time there we were waiting for this case to proceed very slowly. We were told on December 19 in a meeting with Abdulati al-Obidi and some other Libyans... Ambassador Azway who had been ambassador to London was by that time back in Tripoli and filling a somewhat unclear position, but he participated. He had been a former minister of justice. I remember him telling us how quickly this could all proceed. Once the appeals court issued its verdict on the 19th, it would go immediately to the supreme court since the supreme court had already studied the case earlier it wouldn't take them long. They would come to their judgment and then it would quickly go to the Higher Judicial Council if it was necessary, if the supreme court didn't throw out the death penalty. As with everything else in Libya, everything moved very, very slowly.

It happened that the same day by coincidence the Bulgaria foreign minister was in Washington calling on Secretary Rice on December 19. There was a lot of concern that Secretary Rice might say something that would irritate the Libyans, and we didn't want that to ever happen, so we stressed in our press guidance that we prepared that she needed to be very careful not to criticize the Libyan justice system. This sent Libyans up the walls whenever any foreign commentator criticized their justice system. We urged Secretary Rice to concentrate on the humanitarian aspect of the case, the fact that these nurses at that point had been imprisoned five or six years already and to express our sorrow for the suffering of the children.

Some of the children had died by that time, but the majority of them were receiving treatment and responding well to the treatment. Some had been taken to hospitals in various European countries. European governments had paid for their treatment. I remember Mark Perini telling us at one point that there were only somewhere between 30 and 50 cases that really required treatment in Europe. The other 300 some-odd cases could be treated quite adequately in Benghazi which now had the benefit of European advice and new procedures, new equipment, and new techniques for treating HIV victims.

Secretary Rice, thank goodness, made a very fine statement about the humanitarian side, and she did express her disappointment that on that day the appeals court did again reaffirm the death penalty. She expressed our willingness to let the Libyan justice system run its course, and that satisfied the Libyans. They were happy that we did not try to pass our own judgment on their legal system.

In January I found myself suddenly on a plane going to Sofia, Bulgaria, a country I never thought as an Arabist that I would ever have a reason to visit, but Washington and in particular our embassy in Sofia, wanted me to participate in meetings that the Europeans were going to have in Bulgaria on January 16. They wanted someone there from Tripoli, from our side, to participate. I and the British ambassador, my colleague, hopped on a plane and went off to Sofia. I had a 24 hour visit to Bulgaria which I never expected to have, even had a meeting with the president of Bulgaria during that. At the end of our talks, all of us had a half an hour with him as he discussed Bulgaria's efforts to free the nurses.

In the negotiations Abdulati al-Obidi had for several years been the point of contact for the Europeans and the Bulgarians, but around the beginning of 2007, Muammar Qadhafi's Number Two son Saif al Islam Qadhafi began to assert a role. He was the head of something called the Qadhafi Foundation which the Libyans pretended was an NGO, but in fact all of its funding came from the government. It was a convenient tool for the Libyans to use when they wanted to do things, but they didn't want them to be done by the Libyan government, so they said, "Well, we'll let the NGO handle that."

[Excerpt #6]

In mid-June when the French ambassador attended one of our periodic meetings with Mark Perini, that was the first evidence I saw of French involvement. Perhaps they'd been somewhere back there behind the scenes, but I was certainly not aware of it at any time. Then there was talk in June of Foreign Minister Kuchner making a stop in Tripoli at the end of an African trip that he already had planned. That was an on-and-off thing. In the end I think he did make a quick stop in Tripoli. As I said earlier, I relinquished the chargï¿½ship on July 6. I don't have the date in front of me, but it was about maybe 10 days later that we had the flurry of activity in which the wife of President Sarkozy came to Tripoli and secured the release of the nurses and the Palestinian. It's a mystery to me what justifies the French claiming so much credit for this, but I guess I just have to plead ignorance. I'm sorry that I don't really know the inside story there. But why the French got so much publicity-favorable publicity-for achieving this is a little beyond me when I look back on the years of work by Mark Perini and the other European ambassadors who were negotiating this issue all that time.

Q: In the first place, PR is PR. Public Relations is Public Relations. If you've got the wife... I think this was the only time she played a role, and she got divorced from Sarkozy, and he married an Italian fashion model-singer.

What was your evaluation, Chuck, of Qadhafi and his regime, as he affected the regime?

CECIL: Let's divide that into two aspects. There's what we might call the Libyan decision-making process, which I can say a few things about, and then there's the question that occupied every diplomat in Tripoli. That's the question of the succession. What will happen when Qadhafi goes?

First, on the decision-making process I think I said earlier decisions are very slow and difficult to obtain because no government official will decide anything important unless he knows it's okay with The Leader. There's no reward for initiative or risk-taking in the Libyan government. There's only risk, only danger, so no official will do anything unless he's absolutely certain it's okay. Getting The Leader's opinion on issues is not always a quick process. Sometimes Libyans are reluctant to present difficult questions to The Leader. They don't want to irritate him or seem to be the bearer of bad tidings or difficult issues. So sometimes there's a delay there.

[Excerpt #7]

On another occasion, in February I think it was, I was invited to Sirt, or S-i-r-t-e sometimes it's spelled, which is where he spends a lot of his time. It's in the north middle part of Libya between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, and it's where Qadhafi wanted to establish his capital. There are many huge expensive government buildings there, mostly empty because the move never happened. But Qadhafi has his famous tent there, and he likes to receive visitors there in the tent which is a very fancy, elaborate tent with air conditioners and everything else.

Anyway, Libya had negotiated a peace settlement between the central government of the Central African Republic and a rebel group led by a rebel named Miskine. Qadhafi decided he wanted the ambassadors of the permanent members of the UN Security Council to come to Sirt to witness the signing of the peace accord. Saturday morning I got a phone call from protocol telling me I needed to be at the airport at four o'clock that afternoon when I would be flown to Sirt to witness this event. There it was a much smaller gathering, and I was able to shake Qadhafi's hand and greet him, but we didn't engage in any substitive conversation.

In the course of those ceremonies he did give another... I'll call it speech. Once again he mumbled, and it was difficult to understand. He had at that time a French interpreter; that is, a Moroccan I believe he was. In any case an Arab who translated his Arabic into beautiful French. The French was delivered very clearly and articulately, but the speech by Qadhafi was somewhat the opposite.

[Excerpt #8]

The question of the succession. That's an interesting word, succession. Qadhafi holds no government position and no party position. There is no party. He likes to speak from this posture, this position. He frequently says, "The government has messed up. I'm not part of the government. I'm here to represent you the people." His only title that's ever used in Libya is "The Guide of the Revolution," or sometimes "The Leader of the revolution." Other than that, no official title. I never heard anyone call him Colonel Qadhafi in Libya. We seem to still do that in the West.

If he has no official position, how can somebody succeed to no official position? Nevertheless, he is the decision-maker, so if he disappears, who's going to make the decisions? That's a difficult question for the Libyan political system to figure our since they've hardly ever done that. Qadhafi has six sons. The oldest is from his first wife. That son is named Mohammed, and he oversees the country's communications, telecommunications systems, telephone, TV, that sort of thing. He seems to have no political ambition.

[Excerpt #9]

I once asked a very respected European diplomat, an Arabist, if the Qadhafi sons would be able to agree on which one should succeed their father. He replied, "'Agree' may not be the best word, but they will work together. They know if they do not stand together, they will all be thrown out." There may be some truth in that.

There was a demonstration in Benghazi in February of 2006 before I arrived which got out of hand. The intent of the demonstration was to protest in front of the Italian consulate after an Italian minister had worn one of those famous tee-shirts with Mohammad on the tee-shirt, that bad cartoon that I think originated in Denmark but anyway, stirred up people all over the Muslim world. For some silly reason the Italian minister wore it in a public place. The Libyans attacked the Italian consulate in Benghazi and burned it. When they finished with that, they then turned their attention to certain Libyan government offices and attacked them. In the end at least 12 Libyans were killed by local police and security forces. That seems to indicate hostility near the surface against Libyan government interests.

Throughout his history one of Qadhafi's main problems has been the apathy of the Libyan people. You can read the books written by the real experts, people like Dirk Vandewalle and Ronald Bruce St. John. They talk about the frustration of Qadhafi and his colleagues in trying to get the Libyan people to react and to get engaged politically. They were so apathetic that this was a great frustration. Dirk Vandewalle describes this especially well in his book, A History of Modern Libya. I wouldn't anticipate an eruption of public dissatisfaction. I think there might be expressions of joy in the hope that Libya would become a less oppressive place, but after 39 years of police state control, the Libyans have been cowed into submission. It's a rare Libyan who will raise his head and say anything publicly, so I think it's quite likely that a rather oppressive regime would remain in place for some years even if Saif al-Islam is the front man and even if he does push forward some liberalizing measures. He's talked about a constitution, for instance, but...

Q: It's probably a good solid security apparatus, well satisfied with the way things are.

CECIL: Yes, very much so, and they get their benefits keeping the people under control.And the leadership around Qadhafi does receive a certain good quality of life and travel and that sort of thing.

A couple of things I might say a few words about before finishing. During my time there was a gradual increase in the level of our dialogue. I've already mentioned David Welch. He would come occasionally. I don't know the history of all of his visits, but I was there for the December, I think it was 18th or 19th, 2006 visit which was two days of talks with senior Libyan officials. That was certainly very, very instructive... David's primary issue was, of course, the compensation for the victims of not only Lockerbie but also what's called the La Belle Discotheque bombing in Berlin in 1986, for which Libyans were responsible. I guess it would be too much maybe to go into all those details, and I'm not up to date since I left Libya ...

[Excerpt #10]

David Welch came in mid- December and had a general review of these and some other issues. He was really a delight to watch. He has such a good way with Arabs. He continued to press for practical solutions to these issues. Eventually, of course, it didn't happen until either the end of October or November 2008, this year, that the Libyans finally concluded an agreement and delivered the money to pay off all the claims. There's a long history of Lockerbie claims, and I guess I wouldn't try and repeat that here, I guess. It's a little bit detailed and complicated, and I may be not the best person to do that.

After David in 2007 the level of our visitors began to rise. Andrew Natsios came in March. He was the president's special envoy for Sudan to try to solve the Darfur problem, to bring an end to the genocide in Darfur. When Natsios came in March he was the most senior U.S. government official to ever come to Libya in this new era of our relationship. We thought that he would see Qadhafi, but in the end The Leader didn't see him. Instead Natsios had talks with the Libyan assistant secretary for African affairs Ali Treki. The Libyan role in trying to solve the Darfur problem was always a positive one. We had very good talks with them, and they really wanted to see an end to this because they didn't like that source of instability so close to their borders with spillover effect that it was having in Chad as well. Natsios came, and we had good and useful talks, but the problem, really, was the Sudanese. The rebel movements were so disunited and unwilling to come together, so that's why that problem is still dragging on.

[Excerpt #11]

It's curious that a large number of al-Qaeda members in Iraq have been found to be Libyans. I read just recently that 18% of those who had been captured before they could kill Americans or blow themselves up were Libyan. The majority of them came from the town of Derna in Cyrenaica. Why that town is a source of Libyan fundamentalists is a really interesting question that deserves further study.

Q: Our Marines were there on the shores of Tripoli.

CECIL: Yes, that's an interesting history there. A Colonel Eaton marched a mercenary force overland from Egypt intending to free the 300 American sailors who were imprisoned in Tripoli. Colonel Eaton and his force captured the town of Derna and held it for some weeks before he was then ordered to evacuate because Thomas Jefferson's envoy in Malta had negotiated a settlement with Tripoli in which we paid ransom.

Q: This was from the Philadelphia, wasn't it?

CECIL: Yes. Philadelphia ran aground in Tripoli harbor and was captured by the Libyans. It was from the Philadelphia that these 300-I think 305-hostages were taken and held for about a year before their freedom was negotiated.

The best book dealing with that is The Pirate Coast by Richard Zacks. A wonderful account of Colonel Eaton's march across Egypt and Libya and of the naval engagements in Tripoli.

Q: I wrote a book called The American Consul. I bring this up because he was the consular officer.

CECIL: Was it Turnbull? Was that his name?

Q: Turnbull was one of them.

CECIL: The one who negotiated the ransom?

Q: Anyway...

CECIL: Of course since I left, it took a while, but finally Secretary Rice visited Tripoli. The relationship has gradually matured and returned, maybe, to the full level of contacts, consultations, that we used to enjoy back in the '60s and '70s. Well, '60s. I guess that pretty much stopped after Qadhafi's revolution.

For me as a retired officer called back to service, this was quite a wonderful re-tread in Foreign Service work and certainly an educational opportunity not to be missed. The opportunity to spend eight months in Libya and learn what I could learn about how that country works and to observe Muammar Qadhafi was quite a wonderful opportunity.

I don't think it's going to be easy to deal with Libya as long as Qadhafi's there, certainly that'll be the case. Our new ambassador Gene Cretz will arrive the day after tomorrow, the 21st or 22nd. Maybe I should say for the record, once we got that agrï¿½ment on July 8, 2007 then I think we were totally surprised to see that the Senate, especially Senator Lautenberg and Senator Levin didn't think we should send an ambassador to Libya because they had constituents who had not yet been compensated for either their injuries in the case of the La Belle discotheque bombing or the death of family members in the case of Lockerbie.

The Senate put a hold on Gene Cretz's confirmation which in the end lasted almost a year and a half. He was confirmed the last night that the Senate was in session before adjourning for the end-of-year recess Thursday night, whatever that was, the Thursday before Thanksgiving. Had they not confirmed him he would have had to start all over with the new administration resubmitting his nomination. He will certainly provide a boost to the morale of our embassy. The senators never seemed to understand that withholding an ambassador doesn't really punish the Libyans. It only punishes our own people. An embassy staff that deserves the leadership of an ambassador is left without the leadership it needs. The Libyans, they didn't care. They're happy to deal with a chargï¿½. I could see just about anyone I needed to see when they thought it was worth their while to. I had good access.

Tripoli seems to attract, not that I'm one of them, but Tripoli seems to attract the best Arabists of the other diplomatic services. I had a circle of wonderful, wonderful colleagues there from whom I learned so much. The Russian ambassador, the Swiss ambassador, the Canadian ambassador, and the Serbian ambassador were all superb Arabists, speaking beautiful Arabic and understanding the culture. I got the feeling that those governments knew that's the kind of person you need to send to Tripoli. Gene Cretz is a good Arabist, and I'm sure he'll do well there.

Q: Great! Thank you very much. Well, Chuck, this has been fascinating. It really is! What a career!

CECIL: I can't think of a career that would have suited me better. In something I wrote once I described it as "cross-cultural communication in pursuit of our national interests." I've joked more than once by saying that I have a slow-motion form of Attention Deficit Syndrome. After about three years in a place, I usually feel it's time to move on to some new place, to start again the process of educating myself about some new foreign culture and country. The Foreign Service provides access to opinion-leaders in and out of government in whatever country you're in, so the opportunities to learn are never-ending, and the opportunities for educating people about our country and our values are also always there. I relished that challenge. As a photographer of Third World cultures now, I especially notice the lack of access, and the superficial nature of contacts I have when I go to a country for 2-3 weeks, compared to what I used to enjoy when I was resident in a place for an extended period. It was a great career!

Q: Thank you very much!

End of interview