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

AMBASSADOR JOHN WILLIAM LIMBERT

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Q: John, to begin with, when and where were you born?

LIMBERT: I'm a native Washingtonian. My family came to Washington from the Middle West during World War II.

Q: When were you born?

LIMBERT: 1943.

Q: So you were born right in the heart of that one. Okay, let's just talk first on your father's side. What do you know about the Limberts, your father's family? Where did they come from?

LIMBERT: Well, they, my father was second generation. His father and mother both emigrated from Eastern Europe, what might today be in Poland or Belarus, and they came during that large wave of migration, around 1900.

Q: Were there any stories that you were hearing about where the family or the life they came out of, how they got out and all of that?

LIMBERT: Not really. My impression was that it wasn't just him but his generation felt very American and were very proud of being American. What he heard from his family was so awful that there wasn't a lot of looking back.

Q: Nostalgia was not the name of the game.

LIMBERT: No. I do recall my grandmother, she was on my mother's side and they also, they were part of that same generation, my mother's father and mother were both immigrants from Eastern Europe and I do recall my grandmother, when I told her that I was going into the Foreign Service, her look of disbelief and her comment was, "And what's wrong with here?"

Q: There's a lot of people who thought when you joined the Foreign Service, the Foreign Legion.

LIMBERT: That's right. But the idea that anyone would want to leave, because the memories were in fact truly awful from that period and that was of course the period that drove millions of people not only to the United States but to Canada and to Argentina from appalling conditions in Eastern, Southern, and Central Europe.

Q: Well what did your grandfather on your father's side, then on your mother's side, your grandparents, once they came here, what did they get involved in, working?

LIMBERT: Some of them worked in factories. I recall my mother saying that her father worked in the Studebaker factory. He was a leather worker. I think they settled first in Connecticut and then moved to South Bend, Indiana, to work in the Studebaker plants. Other parts of the family I think had small businesses. I believe my father's family, settled in Cleveland. They had a small business. My mother's family settled in Indiana.

Q: But in the time, your father was working, he was working, were you born in, well you were born in D.C. but where, where had your father and mother been located prior to coming

LIMBERT: I believe they were living in Indiana. They were living in the Midwest. He was a Navy officer and was transferred to Washington, came here during the war, and they stayed.

Q: How did he become a naval officer?

LIMBERT: I don't know. It was wartime.

Q: Had your mother and father gone to college or not?

LIMBERT: He had gone to Ohio State. My mother went to the University of Illinois, which made for some very interesting times when Ohio State and Illinois played football.

Q: It's interesting that, coming from the background that your parents did, that they both went to universities.

LIMBERT: Well, I have the impression that within the family, the children both were interested and this was something that was possible. Again, these were state universities, so these things were possible to do. My mother recalls that her father always pushed her to get an education and even encouraged her to think about coming East for an education, which in those days would have been very unusual. But she said she went to a football weekend at Illinois, she saw Red Grange play and she said that's where she had to go.

Q: Those were the great days of Midwest football. The Four Horsemen, I guess, at Notre Dame, Red Grange at Illinois. Did you grow up in D.C?

LIMBERT: I grew up in D.C. As I said, after the war my parents stayed. My dad got out of the navy and took a job with the U.S. government and I grew up in and around D.C. We lived in various places. It was a very middle class kind of existence. D.C. was very quiet, very southern, very provincial in those days but my parents always said that compared to the Midwest it was still culturally very, very active. We lived in Fairlington for a while. At that time, in the late 40s and early fifties, it wasn't anything like today's Fairlington. It was pre-gentrification. It was where the Shirley Highway ended at Fairlington. I believe it's what's today King Street was the end of Shirley, or Seminary Road was the end of Shirley Highway. That was all there was. The schools, this would have been about 1949-1950, the schools in Virginia were so bad at the time that my parents paid tuition, this sounds very strange today but they paid tuition for me to get on the bus and go to elementary school in the District.

Q: I know, this, I've talked to other people and the District schools used to be considered really top rate, much better. The Maryland schools weren't very good, either, at the time. I remember, I lived in Annapolis at one point and I went to private school because they had skipped something like the sixth grade in order to save money. The University of Maryland was not accredited. A pretty miserable picture.

LIMBERT: It was. As I remember, in those days there was North Fairlington and South Fairlington, on both sides of the Shirley Highway and the school was located in South Fairlington. So we lived in North Fairlington. To get to the school these kids had to walk across Shirley Highway to get to school and when you got to the school it wasn't great. The school in the District I think was called H.D. Cooke, still exists, up on 16th Street, near what was then called the Meridian Hill Hotel, I took the bus there, a very good school.

Q: Now the school at the time was segregated, wasn't it?

LIMBERT: They were segregated until 1954. Desegregation would have been about 1954 so I would have been somewhere around sixth grade when the schools were desegregated. Actually what happened was they did build a new school out in Virginia, it was pretty good, so I think I went there for the second grade, then we moved to D.C. and I went to the schools there. What you sensed more than the schools was just the segregation of social life of Washington. Washington was a southern city. We had, in those days, as many middle class families did, we had an African-American maid. She would come in a couple days a week to help my mother and she was a big baseball fan. But what I didn't realize at the time - I was nine or ten years old and I didn't know much - she did not like the Washington Senators because the Washington Senators were a segregated team, had no African-American players. However, when the Cleveland Indians came to town and Larry Doby and Luke Easter but particularly Larry Doby, who was the Jackie Robinson for the American League, when he was going to play, she and I went to the ball games, she would take me to the ball games. And of course we would sit with her friends and I didn't understand why all these people were rooting for the visitors but they were and of course if Larry Doby hit a home run, that was even better. If Cleveland won, of course that was even better. I didn't understand it at the time but later on it became clear what was going on.

Q: Tell me, about home life, have brothers, sisters?

LIMBERT: I had two sisters, both older.

Q: And was this a family that sat around the table at night and talked about things or did everybody do their own thing or what?

LIMBERT: No, I think, again, what probably influenced my parents and then influenced us was what hit a lot, what influenced a lot of people of that generation was the Depression and World War II and Roosevelt. If there was any religion in our family and there wasn't much but if was there was it was that Roosevelt was nearest thing to God.

Q: So, basically, you grew up in a Democratic family?

LIMBERT: Very much so and if they agreed that Roosevelt was God, then they also agreed that Richard Nixon was the opposite.

Q: How about reading? Were you much of a reader?

LIMBERT: There were always books in the house. We certainly were encouraged to read, good, bad or indifferent. I think some of the earliest books I can remember looking at, my father was a big fan of Herblock and Herblock's cartoons. His early books, with his collections of cartoons and commentaries. Added to that, by the way, if you remember that Herblock was not very complementary to Nixon, when he was vice president. For a while we lived up in Wesley Heights, which was also where Nixon lived, when he was vice president. I had a paper route, but I delivered the Evening Star, which was conservative, I think to Nixon's house. The story was that he did not take the Washington Post, but I do remember delivering the Evening Star to Nixon's house.

Q: At school, what sort of subjects, let's take elementary first, interested you?

LIMBERT: I think it was pretty clear from the beginning my direction lay in the social sciences and humanities. I could do math and I could do the sciences, but that really wasn't the direction I was going to go. I went to the old Gordon Junior High School. The building still exists but the school no longer exists. I've met since many people in the Foreign Service and State Department who went there as well.

Q: While you were in school did you get any feel for foreign affairs at all?

LIMBERT: Not really. Through the Fifties, we had a few classmates who were children of diplomats, I think we must have had Foreign Service kids in the class. We had kids who were from European refugee families. I remember kids whose families had come from the Baltic States. Hungarians, after 1956. But I don't recall any special moment in high school or in school those days that would say, okay, here's where I got a start in this direction.

Q: What about social life as a, high school, junior high school? What was it like?

LIMBERT: Social life in Washington? Have you read George Pelecanos' novels about Washington in the fifties? A very provincial place. On Saturday night the bars closed at midnight. I think you could only get beer and wine, you could drink at 18 in Washington but there wasn't much social life outside of the home. Social life was pretty much the home. There were few decent restaurants. There were movies but little theater. The Kennedy Center didn't exist. The Arena Stage moved about four times, including briefly staying at an old brewery right in Foggy Bottom.

Q: As kids in Annapolis, I remember going to the big city and going along F Street and you had the Paramount and a couple of other big theaters. If you lived in Annapolis, this was pretty big stuff.

LIMBERT: I guess, certainly compared to Annapolis, you're right but Washington still was a pretty quiet place.

Q: Sometimes, when I dated in Washington, very tame dating I must say, I'd catch the Greyhound bus, the only way to get back to Annapolis, I'd be wandering downtown in Washington 'til maybe one at night, no problem at all, ever. Very safe place.

LIMBERT: Very safe place and very quiet place. I think there was a belly dance joint. People tell me (of course I never did this) but people told me if you wanted serious night life you went to Baltimore.

Q: Oh, yeah, well Baltimore had a strip thing.

LIMBERT: Which was much more serious and it had a more ethnic component. I guess that's maybe what Washington missed. It had a very small Chinatown but there was no particular Italian area or Greek area.

Q: Outside of going to the ball games with your maid, did you have much contact with the black community?

LIMBERT: No, there was official desegregation in 1954 but both junior high school and high school remained mostly white through those years.

Q: You graduated when from high school?

LIMBERT: I graduated from the old Wilson High School, 1960.

Q: Were you involved in any extracurricular activities or anything?

LIMBERT: Oh, I did some of the usual things. I did some sports. I had a brief career on the track team. Did the kind of current affairs, public affairs sorts of things, the debating society.

Q: Then, you graduated in '60. Where were you pointed towards, or were you pointed towards anything?

LIMBERT: I went to Harvard, actually. There were four of us I think from my senior class that went to Harvard. Wilson always did well with its seniors with colleges.

Q: In '60, during the summer of '60, you get involved in the Kennedy-Nixon, I mean Nixon, obviously be on the Kennedy side. This has engaged many people of your generation.

LIMBERT: In the late Fifties what we did get involved in were some of the desegregation activities. That was Glen Echo. The movie, I can remember picketing a movie house in Bethesda. This really seems strange when you think of it. It was really a different world.

Q: I know, yeah, well, there used to be a big swimming pool out on Connecticut extended which I think just plain shut down in 1970 'cause they wouldn't have blacks in there.

LIMBERT: Glen Echo was also segregated.. I remember going out there, this would have been about '58, '59

Q: I remember it was rather a minor amusement park in real terms but in Washington it was the amusement park. Did you find yourself politically active or was this just during the '60 campaign? Did you get involved in that?

LIMBERT: Not very much, no, because, again, remember you didn't vote, in those days, until 21. I followed the campaign, obviously and being at Harvard of course everyone was interested in the Kennedys but I don't remember getting specifically involved.

Q: You were at Harvard '60 to '64?

LIMBERT: Yes.

Q: What was Harvard like when you went there?

LIMBERT: I always say that when I went there we were still in the Fifties. I left in '64, came back in '66 and I came back into the teeth of the Sixties. It was a very different place. We still wore coats and ties to meals. The undergraduate library was not open to women.

Q: Good heavens! How about Radcliffe?

LIMBERT: Radcliffe existed. It was about three quarters of a mile away but they had their own library, which was open to men. Harvard and Radcliffe did classes together but there were still a lot of traditions which were hanging on by their teeth. I think in my freshman year there the college decided to award diplomas in English vice Latin and we had a big demonstration, sometimes known somewhat in an overstated way as the Latin Riots. We gathered on the steps of the library, someone in a toga made an oration in Latin that no one could understand.

Q: Which side of the issue did you fall?

LIMBERT: I didn't care that much but it was an excuse to get out. I remember it was a spring evening and winters in Cambridge are about six months long, so just the idea of just being able to get out in the air after six months, to have an excuse, was good.

Q: What were sort of your favorite courses and less favorite courses?

LIMBERT: When I was in high school, it was the era of Sputnik and one of the things they started teaching was Russian and I thought that would be fun to do. So I studied Russian in high school and it was, I enjoyed it and I thought I wanted to continue it in college. I did do some courses in college but in the end the language defeated me. It was, I don't know, too many genders, too many cases, too much grammar. Whatever it was

Q: You have this were you going to a place and back or were you going to a place and staying.

LIMBERT: Or were you going habitually or only every other day. Whatever it was, at the end of the day I didn't work hard enough at it but I thought I wanted to do Russian so I did that for a while and then by mutual consent we came to a parting of the ways, by mutual agreement with the Russian Department. I wasn't going to do that. I did the required math, because you had a math and science requirement but clearly the people who were doing math and science were on a different planet from where I was in that area. That was very serious stuff and looking back on it there were people there of Nobel Prize quality.

Q: Absolutely. Well did foreign affairs grab you at all?

LIMBERT: Where that started was about in 1961-62. My father, who I mentioned worked for the government. He worked for the Labor Department and he got a posting to Iran through what was the original AID and went there for a few years. Since I was then in college I was able to, under the regulations of the time, to have the government pay for a trip for me to go out and visit him. This was my first time outside of the U.S. We didn't travel very much. People didn't travel very much out of the U.S. in those days. So that was 1962 and that was really the beginning of two things: one, interest in the Middle East and interest in foreign affairs and foreign policy in general. A lot of things followed from that.

Q: Your initial trip to Iran, how did it strike you?

LIMBERT: First of all, I was fascinated because it was like nothing I'd ever seen. I was struck by people who remained attached to very strong traditions, be they of culture, of religion, of family. It was very clear that whatever tradition they came out of, that's what mattered to them. And that was really new to me, to see that. In what I was accustomed to, in our own, whatever you call it, secular, egalitarian, striving culture, those traditions, if they were there, were seen as something quaint, as maybe a nice food that you had but they didn't shape the way people lived. In Iran they did. Also I was fascinated by the language. I was fascinated by the history. This was something new. For me, this was something different. I was there for a summer. I went off and took a course at the Tehran Iran-American Society in Persian. I came in the middle of the course, and the first class I had to memorize a dialogue. I had no idea what I was saying but I worked hard and memorized a series of sounds. And I still remember my teacher being very pleased and said, "How did you do that?" I just did it! And when I came back after that summer, academically I went in another direction. I started looking at Middle East courses.

Q: When you were in Iran, did it strike you as a poor country, a badly divided country, the Shah, that sort of thing, were Iranians coming at you? Or were you just sort of looking at things and saying, "Gee whiz?"

LIMBERT: Little bit of both. People didn't want to discuss politics. It was a police state. I wasn't going to embarrass people or get them in trouble by going at politics. What did I know at the time? But a couple of, one thing that did strike me. One day I was out on the street and I noticed some soldiers and policemen standing by the street and I asked them what's going on and they said, "Oh, the Shah is going to be driving by. He's coming from the airport and he's going to visit another part of town." And I said, "Oh, that's interesting." And when he came by, my question was, "Where are the cheering crowds?" Well, there weren't any. There was indifference and I was struck by that. You know, I said, this guy could live or die, people don't seem to care very much. They carry on their lives. But in fact, let's see, that was the summer of '62, a year later there were very serious riots in Teheran, very bloody ones, provoked by some of the more extreme religious groups against the Shah's policy. My father always said that this place was like, what's the word, a volcano ready to erupt, fire under the ashes, there was a lot of resentment and pent up violence waiting to explode. Turned out he was quite right but you didn't see it in a day to day existence.

Q: You came back, first place, we talk about Middle Eastern studies, did you find yourself academically or just mentally engaged with Israel

LIMBERT: Not really, no. I just wanted to go out and learn something, learn more, about the whole region and I went to the Middle East Center at Harvard. Harvard had a Russian Center, had a Middle East Center, and a Far East Center. I think what impressed me there was that people of the center were actually welcoming, which if you know anything about Harvard, most places are not that way. The students are treated mostly as something of an intrusion into more serious activities.

Q: I know when I came out of the air force I dropped by Harvard to see if I could go for a master's degree. I was so turned off by it that I transferred and got a quick master's at Boston University.

LIMBERT: Exactly. Well, the Middle East Center was different. It was a small area within the university, within the college and they were actually happy and encouraging that people wanted to pursue that course of study. So it was my junior year, 1962-63, I took a course in Islamic history given by Sir Hamilton Alexander Rosecrans Gibb.

Q: This is a famous, major figure in

LIMBERT: Major figure in Arabic and Islamic studies. Turned out it was the last year he gave the course. I think the next year he didn't, that it was one of those courses they give in alternate years and then he got sick, had health problems and couldn't give the course after that. So I always felt very fortunate. Somewhere I still have my notes for that course, which are a treasure trove. Gibb never published very much but he was just brilliant. That and a course in Byzantine history, given by a Professor Wolfe, known as the Byzantine despot, It was very rigorous and you learned your stuff. Again, what a fascinating subject. They were both fascinating subjects.

Q: In a way, did sort of the Arab-Israeli thing, you were there, let's see, '64, so this was before the '67 war but did Israel crop up in your courses or was this more a cultural look at the area?

LIMBERT: Not much. I suppose I could have done courses that way but this was very beginning stuff. There was a general Middle East survey course, known affectionately as "Shifting Sands." I can't remember the teachers who taught it but it was a good course. It was more a geography, anthropology, ethnography and you know, it's funny, you asked about Arab-Israeli things but that issue was pretty much kept out of the classroom.

Q: That's interesting. Did the fact that Henry Kissinger was on the campus, did he raise any interest?

LIMBERT: He taught government. I had no interest in taking any government courses. Never did, never have. I always thought that was very wise on my part.

Q: How about language? Did you take Arabic?

LIMBERT: Well, as I told you, my Russian courses were a disaster so I wasn't sure I had any ability in languages. But in my senior year I studied Arabic. It was interesting. Professor Gibb came in the first day to teach the beginning Arabic course and of course we were just all blown away that this senior, senior scholar would deign to do something like this. Of course it was bait and switch because he didn't stay. But our teacher actually was very good. She was Margaret Mead's daughter, Kathy Bateson. She was very good, very rigorous and we learned our declensions and conjugations of Arabic verbs. Arabic is complex but somehow I found it just more congenial, certainly more congenial than Russian, at least at that level. So I did a year of classical Arabic. Couldn't say anything but they don't teach you classical Arabic so you can say anything.

Q: Well then, you graduated in '64. Whither?

LIMBERT: Went in the Peace Corps.

Q: Had the Peace Corps been sort of simmering behind or what

LIMBERT: It was out there. From my class, many went directly to graduate schools, some went into the military and a number did go into Peace Corps.

Q: Did they give you any choice or

LIMBERT: Well, they said, "Did you have any preference." I said the Middle East, which in those days would have been Turkey, Iran, or Cyprus. I think were the three countries. Afghanistan opened up later. And they said, "Do you want to go to Iran?" I said, "Of course! Certainly would."

Q: So basically you went to Iran from '64 to '66?

LIMBERT: That's right.

Q: Well, where did they send you?

LIMBERT: Well, first they sent me to Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Q: That's a good start.

LIMBERT: That's a very good start, for ten weeks of some of the best training I've ever had. We had five or six hours a day of intensive Persian and I found that I was actually pretty good at languages, contrary to what I had thought, contrary to my experience in Russian. Maybe because Persian has no cases and it has no genders but for whatever reason I was pretty good at it. In addition to language classes, we had some excellent speakers, including Richard Cottam from University of Pittsburgh, who was probably the outstanding scholar on the Iranian nationalist movement of the Fifties.

Q: This was Mossadegh.

LIMBERT: This was the Mossadegh period. I believe Cottam had been Foreign Service at one point and had left and had gone into academia. But it was really a privilege to have that course. I know Peace Corps doesn't do this anymore. Peace Corps doesn't do these stateside training courses anymore and I know it's good to do the training in the country but at least when we got there we spoke the language at some level, probably about a two level. We could make our way around and we had some basic knowledge. Of course, one thing I remember about the course, we had a wonderful group of Iranians who were our language teachers. They were just delightful people. It was the first time I'd really been in close contact with young Iranians over a period of time, including four members of one family. - two brothers, two sisters from one family. And at one point, the people in the program presented a section on health and sanitation, keeping yourself healthy and so forth, and they showed a film about Saudi Arabia. Well, as you might imagine, the Iranians were very upset that there could be any possible factor in common between those Arabs of the desert and civilized Iranians and believe me, we heard about that for a long time.

Also, I learned other things. With the Iranian teachers we decided we would play Monopoly. Well, yes it was Monopoly. Yes, it was vaguely recognizable but the game we ended up playing had nothing to do with what is normally known as Monopoly. You turned your back, your money was gone, your property would be exchanged, side deals were negotiated, side deals were broken. Thinking back, at first I was somewhat shocked and then I realized that they found Monopoly, as it was, a very dull game.

Q: I didn't do it but an oral history done at Berkeley with John Stewart Service talked about during the war on the Dixie Mission with the Chinese Communists he got Chou En-Lai and I'm not sure if Mao played but some of the other top party leadership started playing Monopoly and that they changed it to the Shanghai Bund and it has a universal appeal but culturally

LIMBERT: It does, but they turned it into something actually much more interesting. And, again, there were lessons out there. We played volleyball with our teachers, we went out drinking with our teachers. It was, thinking back to it, there was a lot to learn there.

Q: Well, were you picking up and obviously it's very important to your later life, but the political dynamics of Iran, the rule of the Shah and religion and all that. Not that they were teaching it but before you went out was this something that came out?

LIMBERT: It was there. It was in the background. I think we had one teacher who was, politically active on the left, with the Iranian Student Federation. But, as I said, these things were in the background. Of course, once you got there, the reality, the degree of control hit you very hard, as a wet towel, you couldn't miss it.

Q: Was there, did you have any contact, before you went out, with anybody from the State Department or was this still there was a strong line between the two, a division?

LIMBERT: I don't remember anyone from State coming to our training. I'm told that in the very earliest days of Peace Corps senior people would come out, senior people from the government, because the Peace Corps was still pretty glamorous. A friend of mine did his Peace Corps training here in Washington and describes a parade of senior officials that would come out but I don't recall that we had that. Remember, this was after Kennedy's death.

Q: By the time you graduated from Harvard, had Vietnam stirred much interest or not?

LIMBERT: It was starting but it was still, as I recall, it was on a low flame. You look at that later on but between about '64 and '67-'68 how quickly that just became such a major issue to us. I had a college roommate who was in Army ROTC and he did his two years of service in Italy, don't think it was ever mentioned or suggested that he go to Vietnam.

Q: Well then, where did they send you after Ann Arbor? Where were you sent?

LIMBERT: We went, we flew to Teheran, spent about a week there, then we got our assignments and I was in Kurdistan, a town called Sanandaj, which is the provincial capital of Iranian Kurdistan. It's about three-four hundred miles straight west of Teheran and about a hundred miles east of the Iraqi border. It's a mostly Sunni town, in those days, estimated 40-50,000 people. It's about 5,000 feet above sea level, in the mountains. And that's where I ended up.

Q: Talk a little about the area. Was this, these, the Sunnis, the basic Iranian population were Shia.

LIMBERT: About ninety per cent of Iranians are Shia. Maybe nine per cent are Sunni, people of the periphery, the Kurds, the Turkmen, the Baluch. And then about one per cent are the various religions minorities: Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.

Q: The group you were with were Kurds, mainly?

LIMBERT: The town was Kurdish. Since it was the administrative center, in the central government offices, there were many people there from other parts of Iran working for the government, either in the administration or as teachers. The chief of education and the deputy chief of education, which is the area I worked since I was assigned there as a teacher, were both from other places. Many of my fellow teachers were from other places. The education systems was in Persian, so that although people spoke to each other in whatever language was mutually comprehensible. In the classroom, the language used was Persian.

Q: How were you used?

LIMBERT: That I had to work out for myself. It turned out, the design of our program was such, that we were originally seen not as classroom English teachers but to provide what you'd call curriculum enrichment: English clubs, activities, these kinds of thing, work with the teachers, extra help for the teachers. Of course, what we discovered very quickly is the teachers didn't feel they needed any extra help. They were doing quite well and many of them were experienced teachers. Those who were weaker in English skills didn't want to admit it. So what I did was organize evening classes. I did evening classes both for adults and for students. I did a lot of substitute teaching, where I was needed, because first they said, first the head of education said, "We don't need you here. We need you in some of the outlying towns of the province." So I had visions of packing my bag and getting on a bus to a smaller town, but then it turned out they did need people. So I did keep myself busy with those activities.

Q: Were you, it was a city you were in?

LIMBERT: It was a city. As I said it had about 40-50,000 people. It had electricity. It had running water. It had paved streets. There were shops there. We could get butter and some instant coffee and various foreign-type products, in limited supply. It was a mountainous area so it got cold in the wintertime. It could get very isolated but there was regular bus service to Teheran. It was all-day trip. The nearest large town is a place called Kermanshah, which was about two or three hours away. There were other volunteers there and that was nice to visit, and to see other Americans. I had a roommate, there were two of us assigned there. There were maybe six or seven high schools, the girls high schools and the boys high schools were separate but we taught in both. And it was in many ways a typical middle-sized Iranian provincial town, with the slight difference that ethnically it was not Persian it was Kurdish and that most of the people were Sunni and not Shia. Most of, the Kurdish women did not veil. They wore traditional dress but the school students, the women school students and teachers, most of them did not veil in the street, which was very different from many of the other cities, I am told, my colleagues told me, other cities, where you would not see an unveiled woman at all.

Q: How'd you find the students? How interested did you find them in

LIMBERT: It was a struggle. Many of them were like seventh and eighth graders anywhere and put sixty of them in a class together; keeping order in there was a challenge. I can't say I was always up to the challenge. I was pretty young. I was 22, 23 years old, so I wasn't much older than they were. Exerting your authority was not always easy. The students were doing their best in a tough system. Very few had much prospect of going beyond high school. Very few even finished high school, either girls or boys. Of those who did, very few of those would get into the university. There was a competitive examination for university places and the pass rate was not high and it was not high for people coming out of these provincial towns.

Q: Were you picking up a feeling of being Kurdish and Sunni, this would weigh against them also?

LIMBERT: No. not really. Being Kurdish might have affected how far they would go in the administration, how far they could advance, but I never picked that up. The town I was in was the center of central government administration for Kurdistan province, so the Persian influence there was pretty strong.

Q: Were you able to work on your Persian?

LIMBERT: I worked very hard on my Persian. I found a teacher, one of the English teachers, who was the wife of a bank president there. Her family adopted me. I helped her and some of her children with their English and she helped me with my Persian. then I found that her kids very not really interested in their English, so it became much more one-sided. But I found people were willing to feed me in return for English lessons. My neighbor, for example, my neighbor across the alley was a doctor and I think I had dinner two or three times a week in his house in return for English lessons. I think I got the better of the bargain.

Q: Was the big American buildup there, which had such devastating consequences, that hadn't started?

LIMBERT: No, that was far in the future. That didn't come until really after '72, '73. There had been what they called a Point Four mission in Sanandaj, in fact that's where we stayed when we first came, but it had closed down.

Q: Point Four was basically the old AID program.

LIMBERT: It was the old AID program.

Q: It was Truman's four points.

LIMBERT: Exactly, it was well known in Iran as Point Four. I don't remember the people being resented. They were not in large numbers and they did some good things, whether it was animal vaccinations or education projects or public health, they did some good work and the numbers were not large. I think the post in Sanandaj, when we got there was maybe one person, one American staff left with a small Iranian staff and they were closing down.

Q: The big impact of course came with the military, buildup of the Shah's military, all the infrastructure that came with it.

LIMBERT: Exactly and that was, mercifully that was still far off in the future. There was an American military advisory group, there was something called a team house in Kermanshah. This was this other town that I mentioned which was about two or three hours away, an American advisory group there. Some of my colleagues spent more time there than I did. I didn't. I figured that was not why I was in Iran. It was nice to be able to get a drink. You could get a drink there, but you could get alcohol in other places in Iran, too.

Q: While you were in, in your area, how pervasive or not so was religion?

LIMBERT: It was there. It was obviously very much a part of people's lives, but in the sense of the way religion pervades today in the political system, no, it was not there but obviously the people that you spoke to were religious. Religion determined the way that they lived. I don't know if this was particularly religious or tradition, but people were always very curious about my family, what it was like and they said, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" and they were very shocked to learn I had only two sisters, because they, many of them came from much larger families. I would ask them and they would say, "I have three brothers and four sisters," six, seven and eight. It was the norm.

Q: At a provincial level, there wasn't the drive, I guess, of going to school in the United States and I guess more or less emanated from Teheran.

LIMBERT: People were interested but it was such a remote possibility for most people, since they couldn't afford it. There were rich families there who sent their children abroad to school, but these were not families that I saw very much of. I was looking at my usual students that I had. Some, for all I know, may have eventually may have gone abroad to school but it would have been very difficult. There were a few programs, short exchange programs, that existed: the American Friends of the Middle East, American Friends Service,. Yes, it would have been an opportunity and a way of advancing but very few people in those small towns had the opportunity for foreign study. It was limited either to people with money, which very few of my students had, or limited to people who were so brilliant that they could compete for scholarships.

Q: Was the Shah going through any of his White Revolution of various things or was the Shah and his policies much of a factor?

LIMBERT: Of course the White Revolution had started, I think, in '63, pretty much, they say nowadays, in response to the insistence of President Kennedy, who said, "You've got to do something" and then instituted land reform, some programs for women, votes for women, so forth. They established this literacy corps, where people did their military service as rural teachers. The regime presence was constant. The media, the newspapers, the radio, because we didn't have television out there yet, was full of "the Shah did this, the Shah did that," speeches of the Shah. For the school kids of course the Shah's birthday was a big party day. Everybody got out and marched around and people made speeches, but I always had the feeling that nobody's heart is really in this. Everybody's doing it but that's what you have to do. Thinking more historically, that's the way Iran has always been, that there were certain forms that were imposed on you by whoever was ruling at the time and so that's what you did and nobody cared what you thought. As long as you went through the motions, that was perfectly okay. So if you went out and somebody made a speech about how wonderful the Shah was or marched around with his picture, nobody really cared whether your heart was in it or wasn't in it, as long as you did it, that was all right.

Q: Was SAVAK, the Shah's police, was that a presence?

LIMBERT: It certainly was. Of course you would expect it in a Kurdish area. Fortunately, I didn't have too much to do with it, except that the head of SAVAK wanted to take English lessons from me. He was a very good student, a very smart guy but it was an offer I couldn't refuse. So he studied with me. He came to the house, we did lessons. And then he said that he wanted to take me out to dinner in return. I charged a nominal fee for these lessons and used it to supplement or help poorer students buy books or and to pay for mimeographing materials. But he wanted to take me to dinner, so he took me to the best restaurant in town. In the summertime there was an outdoor place, a mile or two out of town. Well, we went there and it was embarrassing because of course all the staff knew exactly who he was and they were just falling all over themselves to cater to his every whim. It was a very uncomfortable evening.

The other thing I remember about SAVAK, free associating about SAVAK, was these guys, they drove Land Rovers, I think, the only people who drove Land Rovers and would walk around, some of them like heavies out of central casting, big suits and wide ties and sunglasses. All of Iran celebrates the first day of spring as the Iranian New Year, they call it No Ruz and in Kurdistan it's greeted with firecrackers, among other things. So everyone, kids particularly, got a great deal of pleasure at setting off firecrackers in and around the SAVAK vehicles.

Q: Did you get any feel about posters or surreptitious communications about Greater Kurdistan?

LIMBERT: Never saw it, no. In those days, the relations with Iraq were not good. Those were, I think that was the period of Hassan al-Bakr in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had not emerged to the forefront yet. Relations with Iraq were not good and I do remember going to, visiting one of the hospitals and seeing wounded Iraqi fighters there. But that was about all you saw. Now, I had a friend who was serving in another Kurdish town about five or six hours to the north called Mahabad. Mahabad had been the capital of the independent Kurdish republic after World War II and had also been the place where they'd hanged the leaders and was the center of Kurdish nationalism. He told me that feeling was much more palpable. Sanandaj had never been a place where Kurdish nationalism was very strong.

Q: There are two Kurdish leaders who keep cropping up

LIMBERT: Well, Massoud Barzani's father had supplied the military forces for the Mahabad Republic. The other name is probably Talabani that you're thinking of. Have to look at Bill Eagleton's history of the Republic but I don't think Talabani was involved with that movement. In fact, Sanandaj never came into the area of the Kurdish republic. It always remained under central government control.

Q: How about social life? Could you date or people go out together or what?

LIMBERT: It was, again, based on the home. Social life was based on visiting each other in the home. As a single man your social life was limited. I would go out sometimes with the other teachers. We might go out or might visit each other but typically it would be men only.

Q: The other teacher, Peace Corps, was she a he or

LIMBERT: He. He left after a year, though, so then I was by myself for a while and then I was a roommate with an Iranian doctor, came and shared the house. We might, go out to dinner or might get invited to someone's house but if the family was traditional it would be a little awkward because typically the families didn't mix with men outside of the family. So you might be sitting, having dinner with just some of the men of the family and in the next alcove behind this curtain you could hear the women doing all the work but you didn't associate with them and certainly dating was not an acceptable practice.

Q: Also, in that society, being a single American was not an attraction for mothers and fathers who wanted to get their daughters married to an American or not?

LIMBERT: That was never an issue. Again, I had a sense that people were content with who they were. Iranians, perhaps unlike others in the region, at least until the Iranian Revolution didn't emigrate in big numbers. There was not a big push to leave, whatever the conditions were. So maybe in ones and twos people left. There were individuals who left but in general, there was nothing like you saw in Lebanon or Greece, no large numbers leaving. Not that the economic conditions were very good, but people were attached to family and place and they stayed.

Q: Did the embassy in Teheran or any consulate come across your radar?

LIMBERT: I occasionally would see the consul from Tabriz. It might have been Carlton Coon, Jr. But maybe once every six months or so, once every year, because we were in the Tabriz consular district, the consul would come down and he was always nice to talk to. But the Foreign Service people were enjoined from talking to us about conditions where we were and they were good about that, I must say. Not that we really had much to tell them. But they were very good about observing those rules.

Q: How did you find sort of the Peace Corps apparatus? Were you sort of tossed into this city and left on your own or what?

LIMBERT: It was finding its way. As I said, I think the project, as envisioned, was probably not well thought out. The idea was, okay, let's send Peace Corps volunteers to Iran, now what do we do with them? In the scheme of things, compared to a lot of other countries where Peace Corps is active, Iran was not a poor country. I used to describe my living conditions years later for volunteers in Guinea and in Mauritania and they couldn't believe it. They said, "You had electricity? You had a town, there were shops?" These people were living under much, much rougher conditions. We even hired a maid, which we needed to do, She kept us fed and our laundry clean and all of these things.

Q: Sort of the political situation didn't really raise much of a, it wasn't much of an element?

LIMBERT: You mean the Iranian political situation? Not really. It was something that people endured. They were not going to talk about this with someone they didn't know and a foreigner. Clearly, people were very polite, on a personal level, very polite and very friendly. The idea of a foreign presence in Iran, on the other hand, was not welcomed and I must say it's a tribute to people's ability to kind of keep these things separate that that second point was made very clear to me and that somehow my presence and the presence of Peace Corps had very little to do with what Iran needed or the economic development. They were very nice, they said, "We're happy to get to know you, you're a very nice person, blah, blah, blah" but any relation between what Peace Corps was doing and Iran's wellbeing or economic improvement was purely coincidental. They has seen foreign advisors, they had seen foreign this and that, and there was a strain of cynicism in it all.

Q: Did Iraq, was it sort of the menace over the horizon or the Soviet Union, were any of these

LIMBERT: Didn't feel it. Iran seemed a very peaceful country. When one of the Peace Corps field officers came to visit me, he had a car, and we drove out to the Iraq border. It was very quiet.

Q: Well then, you were there until '66?

LIMBERT: Left in '66.

Q: Whither? What?

LIMBERT: Then I went to graduate school. When I finished Harvard in '64 I had communicated with the School of Oriental and African Studies in London about pursuing a graduate degree there and I just loved the way they communicated. There were no application, there were no essays to write, they just said, "Okay, if you want to come, come and here are the conditions." The tuition was something like ten pounds a year. Then I wrote them again and I said, "Well, I did this other thing and would you accept me again?" And they said, "Sure, if you want to come now, it's all right." But I got a good fellowship to Harvard to do their program in history and Middle Eastern studies and since I had gotten married while I was there, I figured it would be best to have some income when I was going back. If it had been just me, I might have taken them up on the London offer. But the offer of the Harvard fellowship was too good to refuse.

Q: How did you meet, what was the background of your significant other at the time?

LIMBERT: Well, my wife, she's been my wife now for forty years. We met in Sanandaj. She's from there. My first year, when I was teaching there, she wasn't there and I had gone on summer vacation and I came back and I went to one of the schools where I was teaching. I had a rotation schedule. I would teach certain schools certain days. And here was this nice young woman at the school that I had not seen before. And our teaching schedules coincided to a certain degree and as I said you did not date in this setting but gradually, as conditions allowed, we got to know each other.

Q: How did her family react to this peculiar American?

LIMBERT: They have been very tolerant of me for forty years, having this strange person in the family. They have forgiven a lot of things, a lot of cultural gaffes and linguistic gaffes over the years. But I hope now that I have become part of the family. They are mixed Kurdish and, Persian, a lot of strains. Her father was a doctor in the town and he told me that in his view of her character, she was too independent to put up with an Iranian husband. I think they were of two minds. One, they were a little uncertain about her leaving, because, again, in those days, going back and forth was not easy. But on the other hand, as I said, I think he knew that this was probably a good thing for her.

Q: Well then, you went to Harvard and you were at Harvard from when to when at graduate school?

LIMBERT: I was there from '66 to '68, very much leading the grad student life of genteel poverty. My poor wife had to get a job. She worked, I went to school and flogged my way through the course work.

Q: What was the, what sort of courses were you taking?

LIMBERT: I was there under the auspices of the old NDFL program, the old National Defense Foreign Language program. It was a wonderful program in those days. The government offered good fellowships as long as you were willing to study certain critical languages and Persian was one of them. And there was no requirement that you work for the government, or there was no requirement that you be in a course of study that had some relevance to national defense You just had to be studying the language. So if you were doing Arabic poetry or Persian poetry, that was good enough. So my degree was called history and Middle Eastern studies and most of that time I was preparing for my comprehensive exams, which meant preparing in three fields of history and preparing in one language and literature. I did, I am very proud to say, pass a reading exam in Russian, because you had to pass a reading exam in one European language. God knows how I did it, but I passed it.

Q: Well, during this time, this would be '66-'68, what was happening on the campus vis-ï¿½-vis civil rights or Vietnam, or did that affect you?

LIMBERT: Vietnam was getting huge. Harvard was a little bit behind the times and it's my recollection it didn't explode until '69. The big ferment, the big issue, for most issue was staying out of the draft.

Q: You were now married. Where did you stand, draft-wise?

LIMBERT: I never found out and I never asked.

Q: You have any thoughts on Vietnam?

LIMBERT: It came near to tearing our society apart.

Q: Did you personally have any

LIMBERT: It was awful. You could see what it was doing to the country. Just to give you a very simple example. In '64 the people who went into Peace Corps, mostly went with at least some ideals, the holdover from the Kennedy years. By '67, '68, '69 that was gone. It was a refuge, for many fleeing from military service and what a shame, what a shame. What happened in our own country clearly the issue became a class issue. People with the money and the education for the most part did not serve. Some did, obviously, but many did not. And people without the money or education, they did and they were the ones who bore the brunt of it. We lost 55,000 young people.

Q: I don't know, let's say the World War I and World War Two memorials at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Williams, Amherst, that sort of thing, you find a significant number of names. You look at Vietnam you will not.

LIMBERT: That's right and that service even goes back to the Civil War. For World War I and World War II, very much so. But something happened. Again, I always felt that the society was just tearing itself apart and we were going at each other as a society. Some opportunistic politicians were taking advantage of that. It got worse later, with Cambodia and Kent State and Nixon egging on the hard hats, calling young people bums. But in '67, '68 it was fermenting. '67 was also, remember was the Summer of Love.

Q: In '68 you got your masters degree

LIMBERT: We went back to Iran to do the research. I finished my comprehensive exams in '68 and there was no reason to stay around Cambridge.

Q: This was going to lead to a masters?

LIMBERT: No, a doctorate. It was a doctoral program.

Q: You're going back with an Iranian wife to Iran in 1968 and how long were you there?

LIMBERT: Well, I went there intending to stay for one year, to do my research for my PhD thesis. We ended up staying four years and having two children.

Q: You were there, you'd been out for a while. What was the situation in '68, as you saw it, in Iran?

LIMBERT: In retrospect those were some of the best years for Iran, although, there was a degree of discontent, there were problems but it was before the oil price increases of 1972 and '73, which really tore the society out of its moorings. I went there associated with something called the Asia Institute in Shiraz. I don't know if the name means anything to you, but this was associated with a gentleman named Arthur Upham Pope, who had been a scholar of Persian art, had founded something called the Asia Institute. It had gone bankrupt sometime in the Fifties, I believe and at some time in the Sixties a group of Iranians found Dr. Pope and his wife living in poverty in Connecticut and said, "Here's someone who has served the cause of Persian art. Let's bring him to Iran and let him finish his work on Persian art." So they refurbished a nineteenth century house in Shiraz, a very beautiful old house that had belonged to one of the noble families of the time and had fallen to the university. And so they reestablished the Asia Institute at this house in Shiraz.

One of the things the Asia Institute was able to do was to provide sponsorship to outside scholars. Not any money but sponsorship. I wrote them and I said, "I'd like to come and do my thesis research. Would you be my sponsor, so that I at least have a status there, so I can have a residence permit and live there legally and have an association with the university?" And Pope said, "Of course." I went there in 1968, to Shiraz

Q: Shiraz being sort of the cultural center?

LIMBERT: That was really the traditional poetry center, cultural center of high Persian classical literature and culture and I had centered my thesis around Shiraz and sketched it out to be around Shiraz during the fourteenth century. That was the time of the poet Hafez, who wrote arguably some of the world's greatest lyrical and mystical poetry.

When I went there I had a little bit of money saved. I still was making use of the National Defense Foreign Language program. This was the program that created today's cadre of area and language specialists, not just for the Middle East but for Russia and the Far East as well. We went there.

My wife was able to resume her teaching job. She had been a public school teacher in the Iranian schools when we got married. The school system there and the education ministry, being in sort of delightful condition of chaos and disorganization, never noticed that she hadn't been there for two years and so when she came back they were so short of teachers with university degrees, that when she said she wanted to transfer to Shiraz they were quite happy to do it. So she was able to work out a transfer. She taught in the public schools there, the girls' high schools and I started doing my research.

Q: In every city or place there are different societies. One of the accusations labeled against the Foreign Service in countries including Iran was that it was so gobbled up by the wealthy class and all that. Did you find yourself any particular class, was there a cultural class that gobbled you class, a wealthy class or where'd you fit in that society? Or did you?

LIMBERT: I wasn't in the Foreign Service at the time. There was no Foreign Service post in Shiraz. We were covered by the consul in Khorramshahr who would come up, riding his circuit, every three or four months to issue passports and birth certificates to new American citizens. There was an Iran-American Society in town, a binational center which had English lessons and cultural programs. At the time the director was a local hire American citizen, also married to an Iranian. But in terms of a class, I'm aware of those criticisms. They did apply in Iran, and they certainly applied in Teheran to the embassy. But in terms of our associations, they were through the university. Most of the people we got to know were either associated with the university or through my wife with the local education system. It's a small town. Most people knew each other. So we knew students, we knew other teachers, we knew university people, some who were Shirazi, some who were from other parts of Iran. There was a small expatriate community and we knew many of them as well. We were not by any means in what you would call high society. There was a high society there but we didn't associate with it. There was no reason for them to associate with us or for us to associate with them.

Q: Were the students, university students, restive? Were you picking up anything at the time?

LIMBERT: You could. You could pick things up. There was certainly a great deal of outside control. We watched what we said very carefully. We all watched what we said very carefully. People knew where the various limits were. Certainly one knew that the secret police or the agents of the secret police were active in and around the university. There had been problems in the past.

For example, before I came there was an American woman, a Peace Corps volunteer who was teaching at the university. She had established a modern dance troupe there and it was very good. She was very talented and she brought together a group of interested people and this dance troupe did so well that they did a performance one evening for the Queen when she was visiting Shiraz. It was quite a pleasant evening. But then someone had the idea, "Well if they could do it for this exclusive audience, why not do it for the general student body?"

Well the student body was a very mixed group and, although there was a certain veneer of sophistication. I should mention, by the way that after I had been in Shiraz about six months I was able to get a teaching position there in the English Department. I was very fortunate to do that. The pay was not great. I think at the time my pay was about $420 a month which combined with my wife's salary was enough to give us a middle class existence in Shiraz. There were a group of students, quite sophisticated, from very well off families with tradition of education, but there were also many students from the small towns of Fars province, the province of Shiraz, who came from very traditional backgrounds. They were very smart kids. They studied hard. They worked hard and they earned themselves a place in the university, very competitive, especially to get into the medical school or the engineering school. For those faculties, maybe one out of 250 who took the exam would get accepted. But what they found at the university, this rather tolerant, open live or let live atmosphere, didn't square very well with what they were used to in their towns and in their families. We used to joke that the university, which was called Pahlavi University in those days, after the ruling family, was more a fashion show than a university, especially for some of the young women students, who would test out some of the latest fashions. Well this didn't square very well with someone coming a small town, for example a placed called Darab. If you went to Darab, a town halfway between Shiraz and the Persian Gulf, you didn't find any unveiled women at all. You just didn't see them. In Shiraz, alcohol was available in the town and the society was quite different. The university had been set up originally in cooperation with the University of Pennsylvania and the idea was it was supposed to be an international class university and certainly the medical school, engineering school, some parts of the agricultural school, were on a par with just about anywhere in the world. You found first rate faculty, very competitive students, excellent programs, small classes, good equipment. In fact they even a few American students unable to get into medical school in the States who came out there to study.

But, as I said, behind all this facade there was a real clash of social values. So that when this dance troupe performed for the student body as a whole a lot of these students didn't, know what this was, they didn't understand it but they did not like the sight of a lot of half-naked people jumping around the stage, and there was a riot. I think they ended up smashing the piano, smashing some furniture. It got nasty. And this poor young woman, young Peace Corps volunteer, never quite understood this. She had worked so hard to do it.

A year or two into my teaching one day a group of students in one of the dormitories downtown were making a bomb and the damned thing blew up as they were making it and one of the fellows killed was a student of mine. A pretty good student, too. My students included Baha'is, Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Muslims of course. I had spoken to a Baha'i students because I knew one of her teachers had been a Peace Corps volunteer in a small town of Fars Province. I had been talking to her after class and the next day one of the other students came up to me and said that he was very worried because I was talking to this Baha'i student. And I said, "Well, she's a student, why shouldn't I talk to her?" He said, "Yes, but you have to understand. There's a problem here." And I had to play a little dumb and say, "Well, that's really not my business. Her religion is her business. All I ask is that she be a student. I will treat her as a student like anyone else." That was clearly not a satisfactory answer but I think he felt it was his duty to warn me that she might be out to convert me. There's a wonderful saying in Persian. They say "Jesus to his religion, Moses to his religion" meaning religion is a personal matter. When I quoted this saying, he said, "Yes, but not in this case."

Q: I think, in fact I know, that when Khomeini took over the Baha'is were the target, whereas Jews and Christians weren't.

LIMBERT: Very much so. In fact, one could say the treatment of the Muslims was much worse in many ways, because if you were a Christian or a Jew or a Zoroastrian, one of a recognized minority, nobody expected you to be a Muslim or act like one. But if you were a Muslim and didn't accept Khomeini you had serious problems. Of course if you were a Baha'i, you completely outside the pale, because Baha'ism, particularly to Shia Muslims, is not considered a religion. It's considered simply a heresy or worse.

Q: If you were of that ilk it arouses very strong feelings.

LIMBERT: That's true. Very strong feeling, even among Iranians who are otherwise very open minded. On that issue they have very strong feelings.

Q: During the time you were there, did you get any feel for or contact with the mullahs and that class or was it a divided class or

LIMBERT: I would not, specifically not with the mullahs but certainly with many with very traditional people, because my research took me down into the old quarters of the city. For example, I would go and look for old inscriptions and graveyard markers and most of those had a religious side to them. One of my friends was a bookseller who ran a traditional bookstore and he was probably one of the best informed and scholarly people that I've ever met. But he had opted out of the society. He didn't teach, he didn't write, he didn't publish because, in the Iran of those days he had been marginalized. And learning and scholarship, official learning and scholarship, was in the hands of a class of people whose main qualifications were their connections and not their scholarship.

Q: When you say connections, was this a matter of connected to the Prophet?

LIMBERT: No, no, not connected to the Prophet. No, these were people connected to the government and to what you would call, what the Persians called The System.

Q: Would you find yourself going down and stirring up blind storytellers and people like that or was there something like that, for your poetry and all?

LIMBERT: Basically what would happen was this. Someone would tell me that there's an inscription or an old tomb in this area. You'd go down and look at it and then the people would be curious about who was this crazy foreigner looking at old stones, so they would come around and I'd start talking to them and say, "Look, what do you know about this?" They would have wonderful stories about them, using involving either the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali or the Iranian hero Rostam, the Iranian Hercules. What you found and many researchers have found is that these two characters merged in popular folklore.

Q: Well as you continued this, what was the outcome? You were getting your PhD and then what?

LIMBERT: Well, first of all life in Shiraz was so pleasant and it was not the kind of place which encouraged serious scholarly work.

Q: Some of the lines, I forget but a movie out of Omar Khayyam comes to mind, sitting under a palm tree or something and somebody just peeling you a grape or something of that nature.

LIMBERT: Unfortunately I never found that but life was pleasant. We had a small house, a ground floor apartment with a little garden and it was very pleasant to sit out in the garden, and talk and play backgammon and drink tea and eat fruit. Maybe something about being away from the snows and six month winters of Cambridge, where you actually get a lot of work done. I found I wasn't getting much work done. I had a lot of index cards with information on them, but the idea of actually sitting down and writing something was very hard. The university at Shiraz came along and said, "Look, we would like to hire you as permanent staff, offer you a tenure track position." This was Shiraz University. Not as a foreign contractor, because they had a lot of foreign contractors, but they said, "We consider you now one of the family. We are willing to pay you to go back to Cambridge to get your PhD,. When you finish your PhD, come back and work for us." They wanted me to come back and teach in the history department. They wanted to strengthen their history department. So I was very flattered that they thought enough of what I had done. I found that I liked the teaching. I think I was pretty good at it. So I said, "Okay, that's a very attractive offer." They were willing to pay our way back to the States. And so we left there in '72, went back to Cambridge for a year to finish my doctorate. I never would have finished it in Shiraz, probably would have had another child.

Q: Did you dissertation get approved and all that?

LIMBERT: I had an outline and I had a couple boxes of index cards and a lot of books that I put together and that's all I had. And finally my wife said, "Look, I love living in Shiraz. It's wonderful here. I can see my family. It's easy for me. I can get help. I have my work but if you want to finish your degree - and you should finish your degree - we gotta go, we gotta leave."

So basically what we did was we went back for a year and lived under very difficult conditions with very little money and the two children while I finished it. We had a little house out in the suburbs of Boston and every day after breakfast she threw me down in the basement and said, "Don't come up until you've written another chapter!" So that's what we did.

Q: So you got your PhD in '73?

LIMBERT: I finished my thesis in '73. While I was in Iran just on a thought, I said, "What about taking the Foreign Service exam?" I had met Foreign Service people. As I mentioned, people coming from Khorramshahr. I had met some people in the embassy in Teheran. I particularly remember meeting Arnie Raphel, who was there at the time. I didn't know many but I knew a few. So I flew to Teheran for a day and took the exam and passed the written and had that in the back of my mind as something out there. So after we flew back to the States in I think August or September 1972, I came to Washington and took the orals.

Q: You recall any of the questions?

LIMBERT: Well I recall the format of the orals. The format of the orals was very different from what it is now. Now it's an all-day operation and it has objective criteria. In those days three people examined you and they interviewed you for an hour. I don't know if I could pass today's orals. I remember one question very well. They said "If you don't pass the oral what will you do?" And I said, "I think I'm a pretty good teacher and I like to teach and I think I'll continue that way." This was long before internet. Shiraz got television the last year that we were there. These were the days of short wave radio. So they wanted to know if I still had any connection with current affairs in the U.S., if I knew who was running for president, about Watergate, and about the Vietnam era politics. Obviously they were interested in things Iranian but they also wanted to know about my connection to the U.S. Fortunately they did not ask the kind of questions that they do today. The questions today assume a lot of knowledge about the Foreign Service. I would have been at a complete loss if they had asked me those things.

Q: Did they have much interest in Iran and your experiences?

LIMBERT: They did.

Q: Well then, I take it you passed the exam?

LIMBERT: I passed the exam. We then lived up in Boston for that year.

Q: Well, once you got your doctorate, your doctor's degree, did that change your mind at all about if you wanted to come in?

LIMBERT: I had my mind changed for me. I'd always thought I wanted to be an academic but although I loved teaching the longer I stayed around academics the less certain I was. But what made up my mind for me was about the time that I actually finished my thesis and turned it in and I went to my advisor, who was Dr. Richard Frye., He's one of the senior figures in Iranology. And I said, "Well, I've finished my doctorate, I've slogged my way through this program. What about jobs?" And he looked at me and he laughed and he said, "Jobs? There are no jobs. There never were any jobs and there never will be any jobs." And I felt a little bit like those characters in The Magnificent Seven, who find out that the abducted wife that they're chasing in fact is not exactly that. They said, "We've been had." And I felt a bit that way. So then the option of staying in academics in this country was gone. It would have meant either going back to Shiraz or going ahead with the Foreign Service. And I must say had we gone back to Shiraz it would not have worked out well, although we didn't know that at the time, obviously. But going there would have been a kind of early retirement, frankly and at the age of thirty I don't think I was ready for that.

Q: Were you picking up anything from Iranian students who were coming to the United States, because they were a sort of a force unto themselves or maybe they became later on but at least what I understood, there were lots of demonstrations against the Shah and that sort of thing. Was that happening at this time?

LIMBERT: If it was in the States at that time I wasn't aware of it. I was very focused on one thing and that was to get through my dissertation before our money ran out,. I do recall at the end of our time in Iran, I think it was the last month or two, Nixon came to visit in 1972 and there were some unpleasant incidents coinciding with his visit. Stuff was there, things were going on, but you didn't hear about them in the news. The news was very strictly controlled. If you heard anything it was the official version of what had gone on. But I do remember, there were assassinations. There was an attack on a rural police post. These were Marxist groups that were undertaking these things in the early Seventies. And I do remember, I was driving, our car had one of those oval international license plates on it and I do remember getting stopped one night in Teheran at a police checkpoint. They wanted to check papers and they were very polite, very professional and I found out later that in fact one of the cars involved in an assassination of a police official had had that kind of license plate.

Q: Well then, you went into the Foreign Service in '72?

LIMBERT: '73. June of '73, got an invitation to come to Washington.

Q: What was your Foreign Service class like?

LIMBERT: About 45 or 50 people. This was one of the early classes in which the women officers who earlier had been forced to leave the service were brought back. So we had some of those people. For example Elinor Constable was in that class. She had been in that category. There were a couple of others. It was about 35-40 per cent women. A number of Vietnam era veterans. The upper age requirement had been removed, so we had people from age 22 up into their fifties. There was one gentleman in the class who was a World War II veteran, and had fought in China-Burma-India.

Q: How did the class fit together, given this disparate grouping?

LIMBERT: Pretty well, orientation in those days was about seven weeks and then people went off. There were people in the class I've never seen again, since then. And people were interested in all sorts of different things. There were people who were just dying to get involved in strategic arms reduction or these East-West issues or political-military things which frankly would have bored me stiff. I had no interest in that kind of thing. But they went their own way and some of them did very well. We had people who spoke very good Chinese, Japanese, Spanish speakers in the class.

Q: Did you feel you were, were you trying to point yourself in a certain direction? Was it Iran, the Middle East?

LIMBERT: Well they asked early on what areas people were interested in, what geographic areas and there were four or five of us who put down Middle East. Middle East was not popular then, and everyone looked at us as though we were crazy. But the next day we had phone calls from the Near East bureau, trying to recruit us, one of the few times in my service that that's actually happened to me. And I think one person went to Kabul, one person went to Dhahran, another went to Kuwait and I ended up going to Abu Dhabi.

Q: Well Abu Dhabi was, it must have just opened up?

LIMBERT: Yes, the country became independent in '71. All of the Gulf countries became independent in '71.

Q: I go back, on my second tour I was vice consul in Dhahran and we had the Trucial States under our jurisdiction. Abu Dhabi was just one of the places where the dhows were perched on the shoreline.

LIMBERT: It was pretty basic then. That's right, Phil Griffin had been there, others had been there. It had been covered out of Dhahran. In '73, when I went there, we didn't have a resident ambassador. The ambassador was resident in Kuwait, for all of the Gulf states, including Oman, including Bahrain, including Qatar. The embassy in Kuwait was by far the most substantial.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LIMBERT: Bill Stoltzfus was ambassador then.

Q: What was Abu Dhabi like when you went there?

LIMBERT: It was very rich. It had a population of maybe about 50,000, 50-60,000 Abu Dhabians. We always had a big problem with what you called people from the United Arab Emirates. A person from Abu Dhabi was an Abu Dhabian, from Dubai was a Dubaian, or from Sharja was a Sharjan. A Ra's al Khayman or a Fujayran. But what do you call someone from the United Arab Emirates? So we went back and forth. Trucial Coasters always struck me as a possibility but of course that could always be reversed into crucial toasters, so there could be problems. But I went out there as a commercial officer, economic-commercial officer, which itself was an education for me because I knew nothing about commercial work. And had a wonderful time doing it.

Q: Of course, it was really a center of all that trade, Middle Eastern trade.

LIMBERT: Dubai was but Abu Dhabi was a beach but a very rich beach.

Q: Was this all oil?

LIMBERT: It was all oil.

Q: Das Island or

LIMBERT: They had offshore oil at Das Island. They had onshore, I forget the names of the fields but they were pumping two, two and a half million barrels a day with a population of about 60,000 and the price of oil that had quadrupled in 1973. They were up to their necks in cash but there was no infrastructure and no infrastructure to make infrastructure. There were very few educated people. It had been a British protectorate under some kind of British tutelage. The British political agent had been there. But the British never spent much money or paid much attention because it was one of the poorest places on earth, with no fresh water, with no natural port, a little fishing and pearling and smuggling. That was about it. But now they had all this money. But, for example, to make their bureaucracy, and they all of a sudden they had to have ministries. If you're a capital of a country, you need a ministry of this and a ministry of health and a ministry of energy and a ministry of commerce and a ministry of interior and all these things. So what did they do? They brought in Egyptians to run their ministries. Well, Egyptians are wonderful people but they have a five thousand year tradition of bureaucratic gridlock, dating to the days of the pharaohs. So of course they brought all these wonderful practices from Egypt and imported them to Abu Dhabi. So, as a result, with all that money, they didn't have a physical infrastructure but also their bureaucratic infrastructure didn't work. And it was very difficult to get things done. They knew what they needed to do. They needed to build ports, they needed to build roads, they needed to fix theirs streets but, given the amount of money they had it, seemed to be getting needlessly complicated.

Q: Well I would have thought that, in the first place, you were run out of Kuwait

LIMBERT: Run out of Kuwait, Bill Stoltzfus was the ambassador. Our resident chargï¿½ was Phil Griffin, a wonderful 0-2 officer and Arabic speaker. Nat Howell was there as my direct boss. And then about a year later they sent resident ambassadors to all of the Gulf posts and Mike Sterner came out as the first ambassador.

Q: Now I would have thought, a place like Abu Dhabi, all of a sudden in awash in money. I would have thought every person who had a scheme of how to spend money and this would have been all the countries, the flim-flam man

LIMBERT: Stu, we saw them all and I, particularly, as the commercial officer, had all of these guys trooping through my offices, saying, "I'm here to separate the Arabs from their money. Can you help me?"

Q: Were these Abu Dhabians, how were they fitting in with all these people? At the ministry level, was it fairly integrated, were they getting Sharjans and Fujayrans?

LIMBERT: They were working on it. A lot of the best trained people they had were Bahrainis, because the Bahrainis had had money for a longer time and invested a lot in education, so that the best educated people from around the Gulf generally were the Bahrainis. And there was no barrier for a Bahraini to come to Abu Dhabi and work.

Q: Was anybody calling on you from the ministries and saying, "We have this man from America, from Cincinnati that's got this scheme or is doing this. Is he legit?

LIMBERT: Oh, yes, we got many calls like that.

Q: How'd you handle it?

LIMBERT: Very carefully, because you don't want to be in the position of having to accredit or not accredit an American business person, because if you accredit and it goes sour, then the local government comes after you. If you discredit then this businessperson comes after you and says, "The American embassy didn't support me. The American embassy told lies about me." And this is not a new problem. I think every embassy in the world has had the problem for years, probably still does.

Q: A place like that would be so attractive, money attracts flies.

LIMBERT: Yes, it did, and there was a lot of honey out there. Basically we advised the government where it could go to check on these people, how it could do its own due diligence. We found we could not be a credit agency or a Better Business Bureau. If we knew about real out and out fraud that was one thing. But it usually was not that kind of a case.

Q: Was there an equivalent to the House of Saud, a royal family that was sort of taking a significant share of the money and putting it into bank accounts and palaces or not?

LIMBERT: Not really, no. It's a different tradition. These were very tribal societies, where everybody, even the sheikhs, lived in poverty. The sheik's poverty was maybe a little bit less than everybody else's but traditionally in the pre-oil days they would get a certain subvention from the British.

Q: I can't remember whether it's Sharjah or Abu Dhabi or not, but there was a sheik know as Shakhbut who was a miser and apparently he would, whatever gold came his way he would sleep with it under his couch.

LIMBERT: That's right, this was Shakhbut and this was I guess okay until they had oil and then there was too much money and so the British couldn't tolerate this and so they staged a coup, a gentlemanly coup and Shakhbut's brother, Sheik Zayed, who had been the ruler of Al 'Ayn, one of the inland oases, became the ruler. He had much more progressive and more open ideas. Shakhbut, I never met him but people who did know him, he went into exile in Khorramshahr in Iran, people who knew him liked him very much. They said he was a very nice man but he just didn't want to spend money, which given the fact they were making so much from their oil was very inconvenient.Q: Was their concern about oil people, the drillers and all that, were they disrupting the economy or were they kept pretty much out of

LIMBERT: No, these guys were oilmen. The were there to do a job, a nasty job, under terrible conditions, often living their lives on these rigs or in these camps, getting paid rather well to do it. But whether it was Abu Dhabi or Saudi Arabia or Venezuela or Iran, it was all one to them.

Q: They didn't have a disruptive influence that later happened with the Bell helicopter people and all that in Iran?

LIMBERT: No, oh no. You didn't see them. They were very much over the horizon.

Q: Were there any foreign policy issues that arose while you were there?

LIMBERT: With the Emirates? Not much. In those days we and the Emirates kept our distance from each other. Politically, the British were still preeminent. The Iranians were important. The Saudis were important. The issue with the Iranians of course was the three islands that the Iranians had seized in later 1971. The internal issue was integration of the Federation. The issue with the Saudis was borders and international recognition.

Q: The Buraimi oasis thing, had that been settled?

LIMBERT: Buraimi had been settled, although it still simmered from time to time.

Q: This was an oasis between Saudi Arabia and the Trucial States which both sides claimed and it was put in arbitration eventually.

LIMBERT: There was a brief war, there was some fighting about 1953 about this. You still heard about it, at least you did in Abu Dhabi.

Q: In Abu Dhabi, you were there from when to when?

LIMBERT: I was there from '73 to '75 and then from '75 to '76 I moved to Dubai to open our commercial office.

Q: John, Abu Dhabi, did you see, who's kind of the elite? Were they the merchants or were there sheiks from the desert that came in, or what?

LIMBERT: That's a good question. This was a very early period. The country got independence in late '71, so you're talking maybe two or three years after independence. There was lots of money but not much else. And in terms of a cadre of local people, they were short. There weren't a lot of trained people. So for a bureaucracy they went to the home of bureaucracy, which was Egypt and they brought a lot of Egyptians into Abu Dhabi to work. The result, as you might imagine, was, bureaucratic gridlock because Egypt's had bureaucratic gridlock for some five thousand years and they're very good at it. As a result, they had bureaucratic structures but things didn't move along very well. I remember in particular there was a hospital project that we at the commercial section in the embassy were very interested in and there was a group called the Technical Architects Collaborative, TAC, very well known Cambridge, Mass. firm at the time that was bidding on this project, consulting on the design phase. And the government went round and round on it and couldn't get off the dime. They bid it and rebid it and redesign it and change it. I don't know if that hospital ever got built. It certainly didn't get built while I was there. But that was symptomatic of the way things were. Things did get done, I don't mean to be unfair, but it wasn't always in the most efficient way.

Q: Well then, was there, looking at it, was there a rising group of leaders?

LIMBERT: The leadership was very traditional. The ruler of Abu Dhabi, who was also the president of the federation of emirates. Shaikh Zayed was a very sensible, very wise, very far-seeing person but there was little pretence of democracy or putting in democracy. There was certainly a great deal of attention paid to raising living standards of people. Remember, this area, when it was the Trucial States, was one of the poorest places in the world.

Q: As I told you, I there in the late Fifties. Were we doing anything in the way, we and say the British, of trying to get young people from there to come to our respective countries and train them?

LIMBERT: It was starting. A lot of this eventually was done privately, with universities in this country realizing that there was a potential cash cow out there, with students able to pay full tuition, either privately or through their government. But in '73-'74 they weren't there yet and the orientation was still, in culture and education, the orientation was either to the Arab countries: Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, or to India or to Britain. And the U.S. was not very much in the picture.

Q: Had Wahhabism, which started in sort of in the Eastern Province and that area in Saudi Arabia, had that infected Abu Dhabi at all?

LIMBERT: No, for a number of reasons. The local school of Islamic law, was not the Wahhabi school and politically relations between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi in particular, the largest of the emirates, were not very good. There was a lot of tension.

Q: Arabia had been a thorn in their side.

LIMBERT: It had been a thorn in their side, it had been a cause of a brief war in the Fifties and there was still a lot of mistrust. The borders had not been drawn. For a number of years, the Saudis had no embassy in Abu Dhabi but they did have a consulate general in Dubai. The classic pattern in the Gulf was what they call a skip step. Your relations with your immediate neighbor might be poor, but your relations with his neighbor were better. So relations between Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia were not very good, but relations between Saudi Arabia and Dubai were quite good.

Q: How were relations with the whole Trucial State area and Oman? Or was it called Muscat?

LIMBERT: No, it was Oman then. They weren't bad but you wouldn't even call them relations because I think culturally they saw themselves as one people. There were a lot of Omanis who had come to the emirates to work, many of them I believe in the police and the army and much of that was a holdover from the period of Sheik Said, who had isolated Oman and had prevented a lot of modern development. It wasn't until Sultan Qaboos became sultan that there started to be activity in Oman but it remained a pretty isolated place. Relations weren't bad. I don't think the countries really saw themselves as separate countries down there. There was a certain almost family character to the whole place. For a long time, for example, they didn't have embassies in each other's countries, because they didn't need them. The sheik of one place might get on an airplane, go up and have lunch with the sheik in another country. They'd watch a camel race and then come back in the evening. Relations for a long time were carried on pretty much that way.

Q: You went to Dubai what, '75?

LIMBERT: I went there in '75.

Q: And you were there for how long?

LIMBERT: I was there for about a year, maybe a little less. I went in the summer of '75 and the idea was to open a commercial office there. It was not a consulate, we did not do consular services. I had been the economic and commercial officer in Abu Dhabi and it was clear that the commercial center of the emirates was in Dubai. So in the summer of '75 I went up there and I was, one of two American officers there. The other one did not work for the State Department. And so it was just the two of us and I hired some local staff. I was very proud that we hired our first emirate citizen there. He was a Dubaian, who came and worked for us. We rented a wonderful office. It was one floor of a commercial and residential building right by the creek of Dubai. It was right in the middle of the city, where the dhows used to load up for Iran, right in the middle of the bazaar. Right outside the door was the water taxi stand.

Q: They shuttle you back and forth.

LIMBERT: They shuttled you back and forth for the equivalent of four cents. They were called the abra, which means the crossers. And from there I could see Sheikh Rashid's palace and offices and if I needed to go see him or anyone in the Dubai government, I could just get on a water taxi and be there in about three minutes. Again, it was really a different era. We had no security, we had no guard, not even a policeman at the door. It was pretty much accessible to anyone who wanted to walk in.

Q: What sort of commercial work were you doing and how did it go?

LIMBERT: It was a lot of everything. It was helping American businessmen to sell things. We were looking to get a foot in the door for large projects that had been pretty much a province of British firms. Dubai had been traditionally a closed shop for a number of British companies. In a year I can't say I necessarily broke that down but some of my successors did, and gradually American companies got in the door because Americans did have a product that had a lot to offer. The first I think was Sea Land I believe got some contracts to work at the port.

Q: They were very good at

LIMBERT: Containers, to do the container shipping down there but it was still pretty much a closed shop. Mahdi Tajir was the sheik's right hand man and lord high everything else and he worked very closely with a British contractor called Costain and a British consultant called Halcrow. They had all the big work. There was not a lot of open competition. Now that suited Sheikh Rashid just fine because things got done and projects went ahead. I mentioned what happened in Abu Dhabi. What happened in Abu Dhabi did not happen in Dubai. When they wanted to expand the port, you woke up one morning and there was a plan to expand the port, signed and sealed.

Q: I had commercial responsibility for that area out of Dhahran and I remember, with not a great deal of pride today, working to get Chesterfield cigarettes in. Players cigarettes ruled the day.

LIMBERT: Exactly. Now, America's strengths in those areas included automobiles. People liked American cars. You didn't worry about the price of gasoline. They had very good air conditioners. So General Motors and Chrysler did pretty well. The best thing we had going were air conditioning equipment for homes and commercial buildings. Nobody could compete with Carrier or York in those days. Food, we exported a lot of food at the time. I counted among a lot of people I knew there many of the grocery kings of Dubai.

Q: How about Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola?

LIMBERT: I think Coca Cola was on the boycott list in those days. Ford was boycotted.

Q: It may have been. I remember Pepsi Cola was the big thing in Dhahran

LIMBERT: I can't remember who had the Pepsi at the time. Certainly soft drinks were a big item. A lot of it was imported into the emirates and a lot of it was still transit trade into southern Iran.

Q: How about, was gold still, did you see a couple of coolies going, heavily laden with a very small loaded box going down to dhows?

LIMBERT: There was, that was still there. Robin Moore describes that wonderfully in his novel Dubai, a somewhat romanticized version of it. The trade still existed but I gather it was not as important as it had been in the Sixties. For one thing, I think the Indians had gotten smarter and had at last eased the regulations on gold because the more restrictions the Indian government put the higher of price of gold went, the bigger the profit for the Dubaians. People told me if they could get one cargo in five through they made money. And many of the families there had, their original activity was, as they said, "transit trade", which was the euphemism for smuggling gold into India.

Q: Both in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, how did the embassy look at these independent sheikdoms, Ra's al Khaymah,

LIMBERT: And Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al Qaywayn, Fujairah.

Q: How did they fit into this thing or were they just little towns withering on the vine?

LIMBERT: There wasn't much out there. Ambassador Sterner had just come in. He announced that he wanted to go visit the east coast, the emirates and go to Fujairah and then there were enclaves of other emirates over there and so you needed four by fours to go over there. It was quite an adventure doing it and the accommodations were pretty basic. The food, everything else was very basic over there. There was some tourism potential there. Probably some of the most attractive parts of the UAE. There's some agriculture over there. But there wasn't much else. That was really the first test for the federal government, because this federation was created with a very weak federal government and the power remained in the hands of the two wealthiest emirates, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, with Sharjah coming in third and the rest with nothing. So it was a test for the federal government whether they could provide services to these other places at a level comparable to what was available to the wealthiest emirates: hospitals, electricity, roads, security and so forth. And I must say they did pretty well.

Q: Again, I'm reaching back to a different era, but not that far away, but there was a medical missionary. Were there any medical missionaries there? I think a woman doctor had been there since before World War One.

LIMBERT: Well there was a very famous medical missionary in Kuwait. I can't remember in the emirates.

Q: But I was wondering whether there was any of that activity.

LIMBERT: The best hospital in Dubai at the time was the Iranian hospital. There was also a Kuwait hospital. The Iranian hospital was considered one of the best. There was also the government hospital, Rashid Hospital, which was not bad. But the best one was the Iranian hospital.

Q: As a commercial officer did you have a problem that I had? That was American firms, if they sent somebody out they'd send somebody out once a year and they would come on Thursday and leave on Saturday, expecting to do business on Friday or the equivalent. In other words, they wouldn't spend much time and they were not willing to deal in small lots. They wanted to, "Well, we've got our office in Missouri. If you want something, you can go there." They were unwilling to sell small lots, whereas the British and the Germans and all would come in and do a more responsive job.

LIMBERT: Well, there were two or three different kinds of American firms that we dealt with. There were the big contractors, the Bechtels of the world who knew what they were about. They didn't need much from us. They would often come by more as a courtesy, because they were smart enough to know that if they needed something they could probably get it themselves. But they certainly knew what they were about. Then there were the firms that had long established trading relationships with the local companies, like Carrier and York and other places and once again they knew what they were about. But then there were the companies, as you describe, where it was often very frustrating to deal with them because they were not willing to put in the time or the effort to establish business down there and I think frankly they saw it as beneath them, not worth their time dealing with them. The local people they dealt with felt that. They were smart people and they knew when they were being condescended to.

Q: During the time you were in, now we're talking about Dubai and all, were there any problems of seeing possible rebellions or social movements or anything of that nature that might upset things or was it a pretty quiet place?

LIMBERT: It was very quiet. People seemed to be busy making money and they were making money. The great majority of the workers were not local, they were foreigners.

Q: Where were they from?

LIMBERT: Mostly it was the Subcontinent. Dubai was and still is pretty much a caste system. Your place in society is defined by where you're from and what you do. And if you're from the Subcontinent, if you're from Bangladesh, for example, you might be doing manual labor or working in the fruit markets or some such thing. If you're from Kerala, from south India, you might be doing clerical work or be a grocer, this kind of thing. If you're from Pakistan or India and you're a bit better educated you might be working in an auto agency.

My son was visiting us there one time, this was our later assignment. Our son, he was in college when he came and visited us and he got a summer job selling cars in the Mazda agency. The other guys in the agency were mostly from India and Pakistan and were all quite well educated people. I think he was earning maybe three or four hundred dollars a month at this job. And customers would come in and he would start talking to them and describing a car, and they would look at him and because he's mixed background you couldn't tell by looking at him just where he was from. You might think he was part Arab, you might think he was part Indian, because my wife is from Iran. So he's not clearly Western. But he would start speaking to them in this unaccented American English and people would look at him funny and say, "You speak very good English. Did you live in the States for a while?" because of course in this caste system of Dubai you expected the person who was doing the job that he did to be from India or Pakistan. You did not expect an American to be doing that job. Americans did certain things, Indians did certain things, Palestinians did certain things, Lebanese did certain things and that was the way the society worked.

Q: Did we have any aspirations to set up a military presence in the area?

LIMBERT: Not then. That came later. A lot of that came after the Iranian Revolution and heating up of the Cold War and the aftermath of the Carter Doctrine. But not at that time. I think both we and the people from the emirates were content to keep the relationship correct but not necessarily that close. We were not that interested in getting involved. I don't think they were, either.

Q: Was there concern there about the Iranians, prior to the revolution? The whole idea, you call it the Persian Gulf or the Arabian Gulf and Iranian aspirations about Bahrain and other places. Was this an element that was going around?

LIMBERT: It was there. Certainly the Iranians had taken the three islands, Abu Musa and the two Tunb Islands, just at the time of the British withdrawal from the emirates. They had recognized Bahrain, I think this was part of the deal, if you read the history but there was a certain suspicion in the atmosphere. There was a large Iranian population there. There was a large element, in Dubai particularly, who traced their origins to Iran. They were citizens of the UAE. To all intents and purposes they were citizens there but their origins went back to the southern coast of Iran. I can't say they were second class citizens but they were f a special group. They and the so-called northern Iranians, though, the people from Teheran and Isfahan and Shiraz, didn't have much in common them. Culturally they were very different. For one thing, these southerners were Sunni for the most part. They really were culturally most closer to the Arabs than to their northern brethren. It was interesting, though, because Dubai was culturally very mixed. You had the Indian community and large British community and each had sort of its own social club and there were newspapers and cinemas in foreign languages. At that time you never saw that in Persian. I don't know why that was true but although Persian certainly in Dubai was one of the four languages that people knew. Most Dubaians knew Arabic, English, Persian and Urdu, spoken almost interchangeably but for some reason you didn't see Persian newspapers there, you didn't see Persian movies there. I don't know why.

Q: Was Iraq at all a presence or was it too far away at that moment?

LIMBERT: At that time no. There were some Iraqi exiles there, generally in the professions. And there were some other Iraqis there who were advising Sheik Zayed. But I don't remember a large presence.

Q: Were our relations with Israel at all a big issue?

LIMBERT: Yes, they would come up. More in Abu Dhabi, which seemed to be more concerned with Arab issues. There were more Palestinians and Egyptians living and working in Abu Dhabi than there were in Dubai. Dubai, at least as long as Sheik Rashid was alive, tried to get along with everybody and make money.

Q: Well after this interlude, whither for you?

LIMBERT: Well, it was hard leaving Dubai, actually. We liked it there.

Q: It sounded like fun.

LIMBERT: Well it was a very interesting place. First of all, it was my first tour in the Foreign Service and I had almost my own post. I was treated like the head of a consulate there, was invited to all of the functions and all the dinners. And I was able to meet my colleagues, my consular colleagues, who were quite senior to me. I dealt with them and dealt with some very senior Dubai officials when I needed to. Also, it was a very open place. People would talk to you, and as long as you talked about business and commerce, which is what people were interested in, they were very open to you.

Q: What about your wife, being Persian. How did she fit in?

LIMBERT: She felt very much at home. She had been a teacher in the Iranian public school system before we were married and when we went to Abu Dhabi she was able to arrange a transfer within the Iranian public school system to the Iranian school in Abu Dhabi, because the Iranian government did maintain and still maintains a government school there for the Iranian community. It's run and staffed by the Iranian Ministry of Education and the employees would be like any other Iranian school. So she was able to arrange a transfer there and then when we went to Dubai she transferred to the Iranian school in Dubai, which was quite large. There was a large high school, I think there were two elementary schools. It was a coed high school, about the only coed public high school in the Iranian system.

Q: How were women treated then, in the Trucial States?

LIMBERT: In the Trucial States, some people said that for the expatriate women, particularly the Western expatriate women, it was paradise, because they had unlimited help, they could have servants walk their dogs for them if they wanted to. But my wife always felt very much at home there. One, because in those years she was working in the Iranian schools, we had immediately a kind of entrï¿½e into the Iranian community, and were good friends with the teachers and with the principal. Also, she was very much accepted by the Dubaian Iranian community, whom we still count as many of our friends, because they saw her as one of their own. Yes, she was married to an American but they were willing to forgive her for that and accept her as one of the family.

Q: How, in this expatriate community, was the Shah viewed at that time? Was this a subject that was avoided or

LIMBERT: It was avoided. I don't remember any Iranian dissident activity at all. The people from the Emirates themselves, many of them loved to go to Iran, in the summertime, particularly, because it was, the weather was nicer. You could go to a place like Shiraz, which was 6,000 feet above sea level. You could rent an apartment or a villa for the summer and it was a nice, pleasant thing to do.

Q: I wouldn't recommend the Persian Gulf as a summertime resort or anything.

LIMBERT: No and the rulers and some of the wealthy sheiks loved to go to Iran to hunt. There was a lot of intermarriage with Iranians. The Shah was viewed as powerful in those days. He had put soldiers into Oman to help the sultan fight the Dhofar rebels. Publicly that was not appreciated but I think everyone understood the reason for it and people respected it and respected his power.

Q: Then you left there in '76?

LIMBERT: We left there in '76.

Q: What happened?

LIMBERT: My next assignment was to go study Arabic. I figured if I was going to stay in Middle East and make a career in the Middle East I'd have to go learn Arabic. Originally, up until '75 the Arabic school was in Beirut. I had had visited Beirut in '74, just as the civil war was breaking out and I loved it. I thought, "What a great place!" It was exciting, a real city. What a change from the deserts. But that was not to be. The school moved in '75 and when I told the Department I wanted to study Arabic, they said, "Come back to Washington for a year, study in Washington for a year and go to the school, which had moved to Tunis, which is the normal way of doing things." And I said, "No, I really didn't want to go to Washington." I didn't want to go to Washington, not with two children and not on an FS-6 salary at the time. So I said, "No, I have enough Arabic that I think I would like to go directly to Tunis" and was able to do that. They said, "All right, we'll send you to Tunis for 15 months," somewhere between the full course, the full 88 weeks and the second year. And that worked out very well. But what came out of this was, behind this whole thing was the question of what's going to happen to Tunis, because when the school moved there in '75 the feeling was this is a temporary arrangement. The school, if it can't go back to Beirut, it needs another home. So once that first group of students who had moved from Beirut with the school had finished their courses and moved on, the question was: what happens to the school? Are there more students? So they said, "Well, if so and so is willing to go there, we'll send him there and that will help keep the school going." So I was the first Foreign Service person to begin my Arabic and end my Arabic studies in Tunis. Everybody else had come from Beirut. I was the first.

I went there in September of '76. My wife was able to study with me. The two of us studied together. And it was an excellent 15 months. My onward assignment was as a political officer to Saudi Arabia, in Jeddah.

Q: How did you find it language-wise, the teaching there, there's Arabic and Arabic and Arabic.

LIMBERT: Of course there is.

Q: What were you getting there?

LIMBERT: The teachers who had moved from Beirut of course were Levantines and they were used to teaching Levantine Arabic. A number of them stayed in Tunis. A number did not. So they went out and hired Tunisian teachers, who were teaching something like Modern Standard Arabic, which was fine except you couldn't always use it outside the classroom. It didn't have a lot of applicability in the streets, in the markets of Tunis City, because the Tunisians spoke their dialect and if you were a Westerner they assumed you spoke French. We had the very advantage of not speaking French so the only way we had to communicate was in our version of Arabic. Well you adapted the Tunisian, you picked up what the peculiarities of the Tunisian dialect were like, and it really wasn't that difficult. Like most spoken Arabic, Tunisian gets rid of a lot of the challenging features of the language. In Tunisian, for example, they drop a lot of the masculine and feminine, which is quite nice. And then eventually they would, after a few awkward moments, figure out that what you were talking to them was a kind of an Arabic that they heard on television and they could say, "Okay, now I understand. I've gotta talk to you like people talk in the Egyptian soap operas."

Q: Well did you get any feel for Tunisia?

LIMBERT: We did. It's a wonderful country. In those days it was poor. It's not a wealthy country but it was easy to travel there. It's not large. The roads were good. The cuisine is good, if not spectacular. We traveled a lot. We enjoyed it. It's a Mediterranean atmosphere, which after three years in the Gulf was a welcome change.

Q: One of the charges, not so much maybe by your time but certainly before was that anybody learning Arabic was inculcated with anti-Semitic feelings or that sort of thing. Were you getting any of that?

LIMBERT: I didn't feel any of that.

Q: I think this is disinformation for the most part but

LIMBERT: That accusation has gone against the so-called Arabists for a long time and maybe many of them, have had problems with Israeli policy. Anti-Semitism I really never saw very much. I certainly didn't see it anybody trying to inculcate it. Our teachers had their own political views, like Arabs anywhere and like most people they were very proud of who they were, as they had a right to be.

Q: I took Serbo-Croatian with a couple of Serbs, along with Larry Eagleburger and some others and boy did we get Serbian prejudice. It was so bad it probably made us better people because it was so prejudiced. You do get this, the language schools almost can't help, you've got teachers who come with their own points of view and it rubs off in some cases.

LIMBERT: Skip forward about thirty years, when I was dean of the language school and we came down pretty hard on this stuff, 'cause we heard things like this. And basically what we said was, "Look, your opinions are your opinions but we do not expect you to take advantage of your position as a teacher. You have a privileged position as a teacher. You are an authority figure. It is not acceptable to propagate your political views in the context of a language lesson. If you want to talk about it afterwards on the side, that's perfectly okay." I found, at the time, our Arabic teachers very professional on this issue. Whatever they felt about American policy, whatever they felt about the situation in the region, their approach to teaching language was very professional.

Q: You weren't there when the PLO was there, were you?

LIMBERT: No, they came later. I know Tunis got bombed I think once from the air. There was a commando raid, and one of the people they killed was living near the language school. Definitely there was a pride in being Arab and that certainly existed there.

Q: I realize this wasn't what you were after but in your social life and all, did you pick up any, Tunisia's got two rather difficult neighbors, Algeria and Libya. Did you get any reflections of the neighborhood?

LIMBERT: Not too much. Libya more so, because it had money, and a lot of Tunisians could go and work and Libyans would come over to shop and to have a good time, because you could get a drink in Tunisia.

Q: Reminds me of Bahrain when I was in Dhahran. Used to go over there got a beer.

LIMBERT: Exactly, less austere and more fun. Algeria, not much, Algeria was in its own socialist world at the time.

Q: Then where did you go in '77?

LIMBERT: We left, in December of '77 to go to Jeddah, to go to Saudi Arabia.

Q: You were there from when 'til when?

LIMBERT: Got there January of '78 and left in August of '79 I curtailed out of there to go to serve in Iran.

Q: What was Saudi Arabia like when you went there?

LIMBERT: Bizarre, bizarre place. Our ambassador was a wonderful man, a Jimmy Carter political appointee, Governor John West, governor of South Carolina. He had been an early Jimmy Carter supporter. When Carter asked him what job he wanted, he said he wanted to be ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Carter reportedly said, "Okay, if that's what you want." The king was King Khalid, although he was ill and Fahd was then the crown prince and was essentially running things. The country appeared stable, very wealthy, much construction, much development going on. Politically, frankly, for someone in my job, I was like the number three in the political section, there wasn't much to do.

Q: I'm wondering, there are a couple of things that were going on that have sort of come back to haunt us. One was, what do we do with all this money and you were educating the population who were not educated to maintain jobs, in other words you hire somebody to do it. It's like having a bunch of small kids.

LIMBERT: Plus you have a demographic time bomb coming up. Your population's increasing. A lot of people were going to the States to study. Our consular section was very busy there. A Saudi passport was considered as good as gold. Most applicants we didn't interview, something that came back to haunt us later on but the record of people staying or skipping out or overstaying their visas was about zero. So most Saudi passport holders were good. Either they travelled as tourists and spent lots of money or they came for medical treatment, spent more money or they came as students, and spent even more money. So we were very happy. There was a lot of training going on. This is also the period in which there was the controversy over the sale of F-15's to Saudi Arabia. Eventually that sale was approved. There was a large American military mission. Most of it was in Riyadh and Dhahran and not Jeddah. You didn't see much of that in Jeddah but the embassy was there. There was talk of moving to Riyadh eventually but everybody who was in Jeddah was happy that it wouldn't happen on anyone's watch when we were there.

I think basically we didn't know much about that country, with all of our presence there we didn't have much of a sense of the internal dynamics which led, for example, to the seizure of the mosque in Mecca in 1980. I think everyone was caught by surprise about that. I know we looked more carefully at Saudi Arabia as the Iranian Revolution was heating up in '78. I remember one of my assignments was to address the question: could such a thing happen here? Could there be such a thing? And my conclusion was not anything very profound, typical Foreign Service: probably not. There are disturbing elements. Corruption was disturbing. The privileges of the parasitic royal family were problems. There were potential problems with Shia in the Eastern Province. There were social strains. Can you continue the Wahhabi tradition in a place that is economically and physically becoming so modern? So you had up to date roads, shopping malls, all of these things, universities, all of these things going up. Can you continue the tradition? So we looked at the society. We didn't see the same conditions in Iran but we didn't know much about it. That's what I said. In my position as the third political officer I did what I could. Part of it was to do internal reporting but there wasn't really much I could do.

Q: Did we take a look at the educational system, because this, now we're looking at it more closely. Teaching essentially hatred of anyone who's not a Wahhabi, practically.

LIMBERT: No, we didn't, in those days. My wife taught in one of the girls schools there in Jeddah and enjoyed it. Most of the other teachers were Egyptians and Syrians. She made good friends with them. It was funny. She couldn't drive to school so we made an arrangement, had a driver come and pick her up and she had to wear an abaya, cover her head, between home and school. Once she got in the school it was all women so and she enjoyed doing that. She did that there. But she never noticed anything like that, in that particular school. It was a private school but followed the government curriculum. No, those were not big issues at the time.

Q: How'd you find the ambassador?

LIMBERT: Oh, he was wonderful. People talk about political appointees. He's probably the best boss I ever had. He got along extremely well with the Saudis. He took very good care of the people he worked with. He didn't like official functions. He hated national days. I don't think he ever went to a national day. Maybe he went to the British national day. Diplomatic chit-chat was not his thing. So he scattered those around to various people in the embassy. If he wasn't doing some official function at the end of the day he'd poll the embassy and say, "If you're not doing anything, come over for dinner tonight." It was kind of y'all come. And he ran the place like a South Carolina open house. And it didn't matter if you were a communicator or a junior political officer or someone senior. Rank didn't matter to him. I can say he was very good to me and to the other junior officers, to the point that almost everyone who served with him in those years he stayed in contact with afterwards. And when, in my case it was twenty years later, I was sworn in as ambassador, he came to the swearing in, he and his wife flew up from South Carolina, came to the swearing in and then gave a reception for us afterwards. And it wasn't just me. There were others who worked there, Skip Gnehm was there. Mark Hambley was there. There were some others. He did the same for everyone. The lessons that I got in terms of loyalty were invaluable. That's not something that you always see in the professional service, among career officers. People move on but if you worked well for him he would repay that loyalty in many ways.

Q: So what happened, I'm talking about 1979?

LIMBERT: This was '78-'79 and of course we watched with some confusion as the situation in Iran deteriorated very fast.

Q: At that time, what were you getting from the Saudis? Had they looked at this thing? Here was a king, they hadn't been on the best of terms, there was a dispute over the Persian or Arabian Gulf and all this but basically you have the Shah and the King of Saudi Arabia and all of a sudden one of those goes down the tubes. What the reaction you were getting?

LIMBERT: You're right and at one level the two countries didn't get along very well. Hence the question of who was the big power in the neighborhood. But on the other hand if you were sitting in Riyadh in 1978 and '79 and in the decades before, the loudest sound you would have heard in the neighborhood was the sound of crashing thrones. Starting with Egypt, going to Iraq, then going to Libya, going to Ethiopia, Afghanistan. Yemen wasn't strictly a monarchy but the regime was autocratic or monarchy-like regime was gone. So you always asked the question, "Who's next?"

Q: Back in '58 to '60, we were kind of looking at the Saudi rule and thinking "You've got enough Palestinians here" and the general prediction was "Well it can't last forever."

LIMBERT: Of course, nothing does. On the one side, it looked about as stable as you could get. The same family had been there for two or three rulers. There was a succession. There seemed to be an endless line of brothers lined up. Eventually there would be a problem, when the throne had to go to down to the next generation but that seemed a long way away and the relationship with the U.S. was obviously mutually profitable. But then the events in Iran threw that all into question.

Q: Were there any, before you went out to Iran yourself, were there any moves or positioning that the Saudis were doing vis-ï¿½-vis Iran? I was wondering whether we were going to the Saudis saying, "What's happening? What are you going to do about this?"

LIMBERT: The Saudis didn't understand much about Iran. In general the Arab countries don't understand much about Iran. They're like us and the Mexicans. They like Iranian music and they like the food but in terms of understanding what makes the place tick, there isn't much there. It's a different culture. It's heretical on the religious side. It's just a different kind of place. They don't really know much about it. I must say it's mutual. On the Iranian side there isn't much understanding of the Arabs either or appreciation of their culture.

Q: It's one of these things where we're talking about the Iranians, the majority of the Iraqis are Shiites, will all get together. We went through this with the Chinese and the Vietnamese. It wasn't long before they were at war with each other. And they're not parallel but at the same time there's something there that

LIMBERT: It's more complicated. It's obviously more complicated than that but the Saudis did not know what to make of this. Of course, there were some elements within our own administration that were feeding the Saudis' own sense of paranoia and encirclement. I remember seeing a map that the Saudis used in briefing visitors which showed them encircled by places, areas colored in red. Remember this is the Cold War and when I asked one of my Saudi friends, "Where did you get that map?" he said, "Oh, the U.S. Military Advisory Group drew that for us" and the implication was by showing this to visiting congressmen they could make an impression. So there was certainly that sense of paranoia, but I can't say it had one hundred per cent authentically Saudi roots.

Q: Well then, how did you get roped into, volunteer or how did you get into Iran?

LIMBERT: I hate to admit it but I volunteered. I hadn't wanted to go there earlier. I hadn't wanted to go there to serve. I was happy to be there on vacation, see the family, send the family there for the summer to escape the heat of the Peninsula but in early '79, I was in Saudi Arabia, and it wasn't the best assignment I'd ever had. I've liked most of my assignments in the Foreign Service but that one I did not, despite the excellent leadership we had at the embassy, with Ambassador West

Q: There wasn't much to work on.

LIMBERT: For a junior political officer, you had the crumbs of the crumbs.

Q: Reporting on the minor political parties

LIMBERT: No, nor the major political parties. There weren't any political parties. It's a very withdrawn society. It's closed. You do the best you can. And the atmosphere at the embassy, it wasn't the best I had seen in terms of getting out and doing things. So it wasn't the happiest place for a junior political officer. Anyway, in early '79 there was a call for volunteers to go to Iran, and remember this was actually before the revolution happened and one of the conclusions of the people who looked at our intelligence failures in Iran was of course a failure to appreciate realities on the ground. Well, I guess better late than never, so the idea was let's beef up our reporting cadre there, let's send some people in. And so there was a volunteer cable: Who wants to go? And I talked it over with my family and at that time. This was in January of '79 so the Shah had not fallen, the revolution had not won yet but the betting was that the Shah was not going to survive. The points were: one, to improve, or strengthen the cadre of people in our embassy in Iran; and two, if there was going to be a new regime there, to take a look and see what it was, what the possibilities were and down the road what we could salvage.

Q: Here you had your own agency in Iran, i.e. your wife's family. What were they saying?

LIMBERT: They were as confused as many Iranians were. This was something that caught many Iranians by surprise, particularly the Iranians that we knew and spoke to, meaning the middle class, the modern middle class, who had psychologically committed themselves to the regime and the system. It wasn't that they liked the Shah, but they were committed to building a modern society there. And Khomeini's vision of an Islamic state, and Shiite-based society was not attractive to them and they had no place in it. But these people formed as a group (including my wife's family) the backbone of Iranian society. They provided the teachers and the engineers and the trained cadre that was going to make this place work. They weren't wealthy people. They weren't aristocratic land owners or people of that class but they were the people who made the society go. And they were caught unawares. I think people went, from the beginning, saying "Well, this will blow over" or "This is just something out there on the fringe" to real confusion and a real sense of where do these people come from? Who are they? What's driving this? The same place that in 1976-77 looked very stable, and now within a year that whole regime was gone. The only explanation that many, many Iranians have come up with, of course, is that it was part of a plot driven by the United States, Jimmy Carter and the rest of the superpowers.

Q: The perpetual plot. Whatever happens, it's an American plot. This is a release

LIMBERT: Well, it is. People like conspiracy theories. My own theory is that often the reason people like conspiracy theories is because the reality is so much less interesting. It's much more fun to construct a castle in the air out of a conspiracy theory. But remember, there had been conspiracies. There's maybe one or two per cent of a basis in fact in this stuff that it gives you pause and you ask yourself, "Why is this happening?"

Q: If I recall, the first takeover of the embassy by a mob was on the 14th of February.

LIMBERT: That's right.

Q: That was probably before you got there.

LIMBERT: It was six months before I got there. I volunteered in January 1979 and of course our thoughts were of four things. One was this could be dangerous. Two, professionally this could be an amazing opportunity. And three, personally my wife and children could live in Iran, close to family and close to their own roots. Fourth, at least professionally I wasn't all that happy in Saudi Arabia.

Q: A chance to get out.

LIMBERT: Exactly.

Q: The Foreign Service, our adrenaline goes way up in a crisis. It may be a headache for somebody but for the rest of us it's an opportunity.

LIMBERT: Well, it can be.

Q: The initial takeover of the embassy in February, was that a fire bell in the night or was that just a blip?

LIMBERT: It should have been a fire bell in the night. But remember it's like the cat that jumps on the hot stove. What is the lesson that it learns? Does it learn the right lesson? What happened then was that within a few hours the authorities at the time did respond and sent in a militia or a force to throw the invaders out. The problem then became with the militia, which then camped out there and took over the place and ran it like something out of The Sopranos.

Q: By all accounts, people were trying to do their work and there were these guys kind of peering over their shoulders.

LIMBERT: A bunch of thugs who shook the place down. It was theirs, all of a sudden they were sitting on this cash cow and they were extorting money from people. If you wanted to go in, if you wanted to go out, you had to pay, particularly the Iranians. That was the story I heard. They were gone by the time I got there in August. But it's possible if they still were there the students that came in on the Fourth of November might have faced some stiffer resistance. Not to protect us but to protect this particular money machine that they had.

Q: Well, when did you go?

LIMBERT: I went on R and R in June of '79 to visit some of my wife's family in Geneva. Her brother and his family were living in Geneva. And on my way there, while my wife and children went directly to Geneva, I spent three or four days in Teheran. I wanted to see her family, make sure that everybody was okay and at least introduce myself at the embassy. So I was there for about three or four days. Everybody was on edge. There was a sense of we don't know where this is going, we don't know if this is a good thing, a bad thing. It's hard to say. There was so much uncertainty. And the feeling within the embassy was the same way. At least, my main concern was to see the family, make sure everybody was okay before going on. So then I flew from Teheran to Geneva.

Q: Had the Shah left by then?

LIMBERT: The Shah left before the final collapse. He left in January 1979. Khomeini came back February 1st and the government, the monarchy fell finally on February 11th. I got there the first time in June. As I said there was a lot of uncertainty. I flew to Geneva, I'd been there a couple of days when all of a sudden we learned that my wife's youngest brother, his wife and their two children, along with Parveneh's mother were coming out and they would be arriving in Geneva the next day, along with another child, a teen-ager.. She was the child of my sister-in-law, who was staying in Iran. They wanted to send their child out with the brother. These departures were unexpected. Nobody had said anything about all this when I left. I think this was a last minute decision on their part. Something happened, they got wind of some news, and decided it was better to make tracks.

Q: Had the sort of summary executions started?

LIMBERT: Oh, they were well underway. There had been a wave of them very early on. The interesting thing was, here was a city of six-seven million people, at the time. There had been a revolution. The police had disappeared. The army had disappeared. And yet there was an appearance of normality. There was little violence and there was no looting. There was no mob violence of the kind that we've seen other places. On the surface, life continued in a more or less normal way.

Q: I sort of grew up in the Foreign Service. I was in Dhahran in '58 when all hell broke loose and the king was pulled apart in Baghdad. Baghdad and Iraqis were very dangerous people. These were, but the so-called Middle East street or something really didn't happen. It was sort of Iraq was where that was concentrated and this seems to bear out this. The Iranians are a different breed of cat.

LIMBERT: I don't even pretend to know the reason. It may have been there was in fact a shadow organization that did step in and impose order. But for whatever reason there was a complete collapse of civil authority and very little violence. It was a reason for optimism, misplaced as it might have been.

Q: What were you getting at the embassy, in the short time, when you were there, familiarize yourself, about Khomeini?

LIMBERT: Not much, not much at that time. Remember, he came with the stated intention of not playing a role in the new government but of going to Qom, the holy city, and being a spiritual leader and leaving the affairs of government to the so-called Provisional Government. The Provisional Government was a government of technocrats, nationalists, and religious intellectuals for the most part, who were part of the anti-Shah coalition but were certainly not socially or intellectually incompatible with existing structures and existing social values in Iran. They were people we'd been talking to for years. The provisional government turned out to be a hollow shell but that was another thing.

I just spent a couple days there in June. I went on, I spent my vacation in Switzerland, went back to Saudi Arabia and then left. I left for Tehran in August, August 18th, actually.

Q: Well I take it with the family leaving you weren't going to take your family there.

LIMBERT: To Teheran? I couldn't. It was an unaccompanied post at the time. They stayed in Saudi Arabia. We insisted on that. The Department wanted them to come back to the United States. We argued that there was nothing for them in the United States. My wife had no roots here. We had no house here. So with the collaboration of Ambassador West or the collusion of Ambassador West we arranged for her to stay on in Jeddah. She moved into a small house on the embassy compound and the Department was presented with a fail accompli. The administrative counselor at the time was opposed to her staying. He said, "Well, there's no provision for us to provide housing or provide any other services for your family if you're not here" and then he went on leave. And so while he was on leave the ambassador, with the collusion of the acting administrative officer, arranged a move of the family and the children to a small house on the compound. You may remember those houses on the Jeddah compound. There were some bungalows there. They weren't great but it was a very good arrangement for her. And essentially when the administrative officer came back he was presented with a fait accompli and the Department was presented with a fait accompli. So they stayed on. Teheran was an unaccompanied post. That was a good thing.

Q: So you arrived in Teheran when?

LIMBERT: 18th of August, 1979.

Q: Talk a little about the embassy. Who was running things and what was your job and what was sort of the spirit of the embassy at the time?

LIMBERT: It was very much a place in flux. The old establishment in the embassy had collapsed. There had been a mafia of FSNs who had been there for a long time running things. Many of them left, probably a good thing in terms of the efficiency of the place. A lot of the usual embassy contacts, who had been in touch with the embassy for decade after decade, were gone. Probably a good thing too. To paraphrase Churchill, never did so many know so few who knew so little so well. They were for the most part gone. The numbers of staff was way down, so what had been a large mission was now down to a much smaller staff. In retrospect when I say we were fifty-some Americans, that sounds like a lot. There had been hundreds before and lots of different agencies. Most of the military people were gone. Most of the other agency people were gone. And it was a shirtsleeve operation.

Q: The American presence, Bell Helicopter and everybody else, they were out of there.

LIMBERT: They were out of there. They were gone. The forty or fifty thousand private American citizens who had been in Iran in the Seventies were almost all gone. There were some hearty souls left but for the most part people were gone. The last ambassador had left in the spring of '79, that was William Sullivan. Charlie Naas stayed as chargï¿½ after that. There's a wonderful picture of his departure, accompanied by the goons from the embassy guard squad, at the airport. If you can find this picture, I think it probably exists somewhere in the archives, but he left shortly afterwards and Bruce Laingen came to be temporary chargï¿½. Vic Tomseth, who was the head of the political section, was the number two. There were four of us in the political section. There was a small CIA operation, all new people, with no Persian-language ability. We had a small consular section. Shortly after I arrived we reopened for visas. We had two people, I think in the commercial section, an econ office, cultural affairs, what was USIA in those days, and some military as well.

Q: Why was there this lack of Persian speakers? I would have thought, normal rotation, you'd have some who had been waiting in the wings and come in.

LIMBERT: That's a good question, Stu. In fact, within the cadre it wasn't all that bad. In the political section there were four State Department political officers. Of those four, three of us, Mike Metrinko, Vic Tomseth and I all spoke pretty good Persian. Ann Swift, who was the number two in the section, had studied Persian. Her Persian was okay. So in terms of the political section, it was as good as it had ever been. Barry Rosen also spoke Persian, and he was doing press and culture.

Q: When you got to the political section, there had been this pronouncement for some years that we weren't to report on political events, report on things that were not in favor of the Shah, at least there was this, or did you find that the political section had good contacts or not?

LIMBERT: Well, now we had no contacts, and we had to rebuild them, because everything had changed. What contacts the section had had were either gone or irrelevant. It didn't make a lot of sense to be talking to the former Minister of Commerce - if you could find him. He might be nice but there wasn't much to be gained by that. So, in a sense two things happened,. You had a whole changeover of personnel and you had a changeover of philosophy. I think Bruce Laingen as the chargï¿½ set this tone. The idea was, look, let's see what we can salvage out of these events. I think among most of us there, most of us who were familiar with Iran and had worked in Iran, believed that the kind of relations that had gone on under the Shah were not healthy. We were much too close to the Shah and the Shah was much too close to us.

Q: This was sort of the corridor word at the height of this relationship, too. You can't report anything about the regime that might upset the Shah. That's at least what I heard.

LIMBERT: That was the reputation, I had heard those reports and that was one reason I was not all that eager to serve there in the earlier time. Because you know what happens. If you're the junior political officer and you're hearing things and seeing things and reporting things that are at variance with orthodox wisdom you're not going to have a very rewarding or positive experience.

Q: And the junior officer usually ends up getting the dissident groups.

LIMBERT: Of course. Well, I mean, you're out there, you're curious, people have the language, they have the skills. And so what you had, it was an interesting phenomenon. Over many years, over decades, you had people, often first, second, third tour officers, going off, serving in Teheran, learning Persian, learning it pretty well, enjoying the country, liking the country, getting pretty savvy about it and never going back after their single tour. So at the counselor level you had a real gap. You had no experience and certainly no language skills. Funny thing was, I can make a little digression here, of the Persian speakers at the embassy, two of them had been students of my wife in Peace Corps, when she taught volunteers. Mike Metrinko and Barry Rosen had both been her students, very good students of Persian, by the way. I always said to her, "You had your own private mafia right there."

Q: How did these two, I've never interviewed Barry Rosen but Mike Metrinko, who I've interviewed, he's sitting on a mountaintop in Afghanistan right now but how did they fit in? Was there a sense of rebellion? Okay, fine, you old fogeys have had your day or not?

LIMBERT: The atmosphere was actually very good. And again, I give a lot of credit to Bruce Laingen and to Vic Tomseth and others who set the tone and said, "Look, you go out and you know what has to be done. You're equipped to do it. You know your way around this place. Nobody's going to stop you from reporting. Nobody's going to shade your reporting. Nobody's going to say you can't do this or you can't do that. Just do it." And I often say that in my ten weeks there on the streets was the best experience I ever had in the Foreign Service. The atmosphere at the Embassy was very collegial. Each of us was out talking to people that we knew. We were out traveling around the country. Iranians would talk to you.

Q: The feel I guess before, with SAVAK, was sitting on top of everything and that was gone.

LIMBERT: That silence was completely gone.

Q: So there was more a feeling they can talk.

LIMBERT: It was the hundred flowers or thousand flowers, period. There were dozens of newspaper, there was political meetings, there were open debates all the time. It was the first time in my Foreign Service career, and I'd been in the service about five years, that I was doing what I was trained and prepared to do.

Q: What was happening during this period before you were taken over? What was developing?

LIMBERT: There was a political free-for-all going on. It was not clear at all who or what was in control. The basic struggle was between the technocrats who were nominally in charge, that is in the Provisional Government, which held the so-called ministries, and a shadow operation of revolutionary institutions, such as the so-called Revolutionary Courts, the Revolutionary Guards and other groups attached to Friday prayer leaders around the country who were asserting themselves more and more and who had a very different vision of the direction that the country should go. There were leftist groups active at the same time which, in the tradition of the far left, seemed to pick on the social democrats most of all and allied themselves with the most authoritarian right wing groups.

Q: Was there any, for you all, were you able to get any feel for the depth of the religious group?

LIMBERT: Oh, very much so. In terms of that, it was becoming very clear that the so-called moderates or the technocrats or the people who were interested in preserving some kind of orderly state and structure were losing out. And there were more instances of this by the day. They were not in control of the media, they were not in control of the airports, they were not in control of the streets and there was increasing anarchy and increasing power devolving to unofficial groups. In the month or so before the takeover I made a trip to one of the provincial capitals, to Mashhad in the northeast. I had some business at the university there and I called on the university and then I had a contact with one of the senior clergymen of the city, who was not an ally of Khomeini but was still a very senior clergyman. So I got in a taxi and I said, "Can you take me to the home of Ayatollah so and so?" I started talking to the driver and he said, "Who are you? Are you Iranian?" I said, "No, I'm from the American embassy." The driver got very philosophical. He said, "What a world. A year ago if you'd come here you would have gone to the governor general's house. Now you're going to this clergyman's house. There's where the power is now. The world has changed Power had shifted.

Q: What were you getting from your contacts with the clergy?

LIMBERT: Well, not much. They were certainly willing to talk to us. What we were getting was very similar to what I had heard in the Arab world, a much more pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli line than we had gotten in the past. So this wasn't new to me and I thought to myself, "When I left Saudi Arabia I thought I was getting away from that kind of thing. Now it seems I'd gone from the frying pan into the fire. Those attitudes have followed me here." But people were willing to engage. One of the clergymen who was in the so-called Council of Experts, the elected body that was writing the new constitution, for example, was very open to talking about the American constitutional system and asked us for books about what the system was, 'cause they were looking to write a new constitution and he was curious and very open to talking about it. I never found anyone who was unwilling to talk to me. Nor did I find any particular personal hostility.

Q: Was there a drumbeat of anti-Americanism out in the street or not?

LIMBERT: There was. There was certainly on the media. I'll tell you a wonderful story about how this happened. You remember Henry Precht? Henry Precht was the director of Iranian affairs at the time and somewhere around the middle of October 1979 he came to Iran to make a visit. I was his escort and interpreter and I went with him to see Ayatollah Montazeri, who at the time was the head of this Council of Experts, group that was writing the new constitution. We went to see him and it had also been arranged that we would go to hear him on that following Friday, because he was going to give the sermon at Friday prayers at the University of Teheran. This was an innovation that the new regime had brought in, which was every Friday they had public prayers, community prayers at the University of Teheran and it was sort of a big political pep rally, if you like. And I got the job of escorting Henry Precht, with someone from the Foreign Ministry. So at the appointed time we meet and the three of us head to the university. You couldn't get within two or three blocks of the university, which was a big compound, some thirty or forty acres in the middle of Teheran. Couldn't get there. Too many people. But we noticed that there were loudspeakers set up outside on the street so you could stay on the street and listen to the sermon. That made me somewhat relieved because I was thinking we were going to be in the middle of about a million and a half rather unfriendly people. So I would much rather be on the margins. So I said to our Iranian escort, "Well why don't we stay here? We can't go any farther." He said, "No, no, no, my job is to get you in. I'm going to get you in." So we walk down to the main gate of the university and there are guards, Revolutionary Guards, standing there and they're not letting anybody in. They say it's full. So I think, "That's good. That's not bad. We will have to stay outside." And he said, "No, no, I'm going to get you in. My job is to get you in, I'm going to get you in." So he goes up to these guards and he's having an exchange with them and he motions us to come forward and as we're going forward he kind of whispers in my ear. He said, "Whatever you do, don't talk any English. Don't let anybody hear you speaking English." And as we're going in I said, "How did you get us in?" And he said, "I told these guys we had two guests, two very important guests from the embassy of Senegal." And I said, "Senegal? Look at us! We're certainly not Senegalese." And he said, "These guys don't know!" Anyway, so we get in and we go through the prayer service. It's a big public event and Montazeri makes his speech and there was nothing anti-American in his speech. Actually, this was after the Shah had been admitted and there was no mention of the Shah.

Q: We're talking about admission of the Shah to the United States for hospital treatment, which became the raison d'etre

LIMBERT: Yes, the reason for seizing the embassy. The Shah arrived in the U.S. on October 22nd. That Friday service we attended was after October 22nd, and there was no mention of the Shah. So they go through the ceremony and then the last part of it is like a pep rally, at which a leader gets up to the microphone, chants a slogan and then everybody repeats the slogan afterwards. They started off with things like "Unity is the key to victory." I can buy that; unity is usually the key to victory. "The Kurds are our brothers." The Kurds are our brothers, so that's fine too. Then he shouts, "Death to the three sowers of corruption, Carter, Sadat and Begin." Henry looks at me, this was in Persian and Henry's Persian is fair and he says, "Isn't there something in there about Carter?" And I said, "Henry, there are a million and a half people around here. Just shout!" So there we are, saying "Death to the three sowers of corruption, Sadat, Carter and Begin." Occasionally we reminisce about that story. I also told that story about being Senegalese diplomats to my Senegalese colleague in Mauritania last year. We used to call each other "cher compatriot." He thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard. That was what it was like. There was an "anything goes" feeling to it. But as we said, for someone in my position, and for most of us in the political section, it was a very exciting time to be there.

Q: I'm reminded of the story, I think it was Jim Mack, who was an Arabic speaking officer in Libya when Qadhafi took over

LIMBERT: You mean David Mack?

Q: And the chargï¿½ at one point turned to him and said, "Mack, I know you're happy but I want you to know I'm not!" This is the junior officers, it's like being newspaper reporters.

LIMBERT: That's right. To be the senior officer in a situation like this is not fun, so much, because first of all you're in a security cocoon, which we were not. So we could go almost anywhere.

Q: Well, was there a problem, I'm speaking, obviously, until you're seized, of every once in a while somebody getting yanked out of a crowd, I'm thinking sort of the French Revolution and all, dragged off to the Bastille or something like that or people using the circumstances to denounce other people?

LIMBERT: Oh, there was some of that but what was remarkable was how little of it there was. We kept track of executions and arrests and imprisonments. They were probably in the hundreds. Now, if you were one of the hundreds, that's cold comfort. But given what happened in Russian or China in their revolutions, it was a very different situation. There was a certain randomness to it. Some people who you'd think would be in serious trouble were not in serious trouble and some people who hadn't done much at all had serious problems.

Q: Well, were you picking up from your colleagues who were in the consular section that there was a movement of particularly better educated people to get the hell out?

LIMBERT: You didn't have to talk to anybody in the consular section. You just had to come by the embassy every morning. After the attack in February the consular section was shut down. As a step towards normalization, or a gesture, we reopened it in September of '79 in a new building. We had about 50,000 people out there. They saw something coming. They didn't like what was coming down. We did the best we could. We had, mostly first tour officers there. Metrinko and I volunteered and would go over there a couple times a week to help out. Basically what we did was to make sure that people got out.

Q: It was the beginning of feeling "Just get them out of here."

LIMBERT: Yeah. That was certainly my feeling. I think that was Mike's feeling. People who had some sense for the place said, "look, we know what the rules are but these people are in danger. We should do all we can to get them out." That's a lot to expect from some, but that was certainly what we tried to bring and so we "generously" volunteered to help our colleagues in the consular section but also to make sure that people could get out.

Q: Was Bruce Laingen sort of preaching the idea that, when Henry Precht was there, "Okay, this is a new thing but we can work with this government and let's make it work" or something?

LIMBERT: That was his assignment. That was his mission. His mission was not to preside over the shutting down of the embassy. Maybe that should have been the mission, but it wasn't.

Q: Was there a Cassandra going around saying, "What are you all doing here? Get the hell out, now!" or not?

LIMBERT: You know, I don't think so. There should have been but we were living in a fool's paradise. Those of us in the political section were having too much fun. It was too damn interesting. We had a guy in the econ section who kept insisting that things were wonderful and the U.S. companies had to come back. That was too much even for the rest of us, but that was his view. In retrospect, we should have all been Cassandras but we didn't see it coming. When we heard that the Shah was going to be coming to the States, and that was the 22nd of October, the thought that came to me and I think to most of us was, "Okay, that's it. We are now expendable. We've been hung out to dry."

Q: The Shah's coming to the United States, had that been such an issue or was that sort of A line in the sand or something or how was that demonstrated?

LIMBERT: No, it wasn't demonstrated in a specific way. We knew it had been debated back here. It was not something that came up a lot in Iran but given the prevailing mood there and given the very fragile political situation, my sense was that if we do this, this is going to push something over the edge. And frankly I thought within a day or two the whole thing would come down.

Q: You say the whole thing would come down. What was your vision of "coming down?"

LIMBERT: We'd be dead.

Q: Were there mobs that could be turned loose or

LIMBERT: There certainly were.

Q: Were there mobs sort of roaming around at the time?

LIMBERT: Not roaming around but organized mobs. There were groups that could put a mob together for a purpose and this event could certainly become the focus of a mob. But it was strange. I thought, and probably a lot of others thought we'd just been hung out to dry and told, "Okay, you're expendable." I was not privy to the exchanges that went on before the Shah was admitted, but what I've seen since in the various documents that have been made public is that Bruce Laingen was very clear. He said, "If you do this, you're putting us all in serious danger." And Jimmy Carter himself, when he, against his own better judgment, decided to allow the Shah to come in, turned to Brzezinski and Vance and Ham Jordan and Jody Powell and said, "Look, if I do this what are you all going to advise me to do when our embassy is overrun and our people taken hostage?"

Q: Were any of you sort of looking over your shoulder, looking for a bolt hole, when you heard about the Shah?

LIMBERT: In what way?

Q: In other words, how to get the hell about without being a target, in other words.

LIMBERT: You don't do that in the Foreign Service. You don't leave your colleagues behind. I don't think that came into anybody's mind. If somebody had been out and away at the time that happened, sure, but not the idea that you abandon your colleagues to their fate

Q: What about other embassies there? Was the United States the target at the time or were the Brits, the Germans, the French

LIMBERT: The U.S. was a target for obvious historical reasons. In that very charged atmosphere there was a concern that there would be a repeat of 1953, of the coup that had toppled Mossadegh and brought the Shah back. If you looked at the situation in Iran at the time, there were enough parallels that you didn't have to be paranoid to think that something was up. There was of course political instability in the capital, and there were serious problems in the provinces. There were rumors that a senior CIA person, was in Teheran. And then came the admission of the Shah. There was this large American mission still there. Add that up and what do you get?

The other area of concern was about what the Soviets might be up to, because the revolutionaries I think felt under siege from two directions. One was a royalist counter-coup, backed by the U.S. and another was a move by the leftists, backed by the Soviets, to hijack the revolution. And I have heard subsequently that there were divisions within the students who ended up attacking our embassy, over whether they should attack our embassy or attack the Soviet embassy. The question was, where was the greater threat?

Q: Did the Soviets have much of a presence there?

LIMBERT: They did. They had a large mission there, again, right in the middle of town.

Q: Did we have any contact with the students? Or was it so diverse,

LIMBERT: The students? You mean students in general?

Q: Yeah, was there such a thing as "the students" or were they in every group, completely splintered?

LIMBERT: It was very diverse. Probably we didn't have as much contact as we should have, had but what we did know from friends who were teaching in universities around the country was that the campuses were badly split between the Islamic groups and the leftists, with the leftists having the slight advantage.

Q: At this time, you'd been in Saudi Arabia, did we have the feeling that Islam, in a greater sense, was a threat, take a step backwards and see the spread of it or did we see Islam as being something else?

LIMBERT: I don't think we did. I don't think we really knew what we were dealing with. In the case of Iran, up until 1978 and the time of the revolution, if you looked for sources of instability you looked to the military, you looked to the leftists, you looked to ethnic problems. But you really did not look at a religious based movement. It not only caught us by surprise but it caught a lot of Iranians by surprise.

Q: Well moving up to November, what happened after Carter allowed the Shah to come in? When was that?

LIMBERT: That was October 22nd.

Q: Okay, and when did the takeover

LIMBERT: November 4th.

Q: So, in that period, were you seeing storm clouds or what?

LIMBERT: That was the interesting thing. As I told you, we first thought, all right, that's it for us. Time to kiss it all good-bye. Then nothing happened. At least in the immediate 48, 72 hours when we thought something would happen, nothing did. And we didn't understand why or why not but it didn't. But what was happening was, again, an increasing collapse of the provisional government, informal groups moving into hotels and taking them over. For example, they would take over a hotel and turn it into a free university dormitory,. There was a lot of that and the authorities were powerless to do anything about these homegrown occupations., I spent the week before the takeover traveling. I went to the south, went to Abadan, Khorramshahr and Shiraz. Talked to a lot of different people. No one ever mentioned the Shah to me.

Q: Well was oil being pumped out?

LIMBERT: Oil was being pumped out.

Q: When you start taking over private property as squatters and all this, at a certain point this has economic consequences. Were these apparent then?

LIMBERT: That was the great debate that was going on between the technocrats of the provisional government, the kind of people who thought like us, and the dyed-in- the-wool revolutionaries. The first group was saying, "Look, we've gotten rid of the Shah, we've gotten rid of his people, and we're working on a new constitution. We should be very careful that we don't damage the economy and the interests of the country." The second group essentially said, "We don't care! We made a revolution. We made it for Islam and that's what we're going to do!" And Khomeini made a very famous statement, I can remember hearing it in September or October of '79, he said, "We didn't make a revolution for economic infrastructure." They were going to pursue revolutionary purity. Whether this debate was ideologically based or power based is another question, a question about who's going to control the system. A lot of this I think was class based and generation based as well. These technocrats represented a certain class of the society that had run things for a long time. The more hard core represented a different class of society that had been on the outs for a long time.

Q: What one hears about the bazaaris. Where did they, were they, I would think they would be more for law and order. Were they a factor or not?

LIMBERT: They were on both sides of things. Yeah, they certainly would want the economy to work but much of the economy that we're talking about was outside their purview. They were much more in a traditional trading economy and whatever happened people were still going to have to buy rice and beans and building materials.

Q: Obviously you all were busy but did any of you sit down and play with what would a model of an Islamic government be like?

LIMBERT: We talked about it but nobody really knew at that point. Khomeini knew and Khomeini's followers knew and that was their big advantage 'cause they knew what they wanted and they had a very clear vision of where they were going.

Q: In a way, was this so far out of the normal that you were all too sophisticated, you sort of dismissed it as being pie in the sky or something?

LIMBERT: Exactly. How do you run a modern state? How do you run an oil industry, a modern army, a modern economy, a modern transport system, an education system, based on the models of seventh century Medina, which was essentially Khomeini's vision. It turned out that he really didn't care about any of those things, to the point that essentially he invited the class that ran the modern economy and the modern systems to leave and made it clear to them that Iran was not their country any more.

Q: Had this happened before the takeover?

LIMBERT: This happened over a period of time. This was from the early days but it was getting more and more serious. I saw this in my own family and among friends, who were in a very odd situation. They might still go to their offices. But imagine going to your office one day and finding that the person who swept the floor yesterday is now in charge and is making all the decisions and they say to you, "Mr. Kennedy, if you like you can stay here but you have no responsibility anymore. " So if you want to sit and do crossword puzzles all day that's fine but you are socially irrelevant. You've been pushed to the margins. Essentially that's what happened. They didn't take you out and shoot you but they put you on the margins. You all of a sudden became outside of your own society and all of your education, all of your experience and all of your qualifications, were of no interest.

Q: Was Ross Perot a factor while you were there?

LIMBERT: He had come and gone, or his men had come and gone.

Q: John, we're up to a couple days before the takeover of the embassy. How were things going?

LIMBERT: Not well. Remember that the 22nd of October we learned that the Shah was coming to the United States for medical treatment. Two interesting things about that decision. One was that only shortly before did it become known that the Shah was sick with cancer. Subsequent research has shown that there was stuff in the embassy files going back more than a year that talked about reports of the Shah's illness and as far as I can tell those reports were never pursued. So that when Carter made his decision in October of 1979, this information about the Shah's illness was news to him, even though there had been indications of it for more than a year before that. The other was the sense we had at the embassy that, although Bruce Laingen had advised very strongly against admitting the Shah, we were being hung out to dry. Maybe there were good reasons for admitting the Shah, but if you're going to do it the book solution is you also think about the fate of your people there. To realize that the security situation in Teheran had deteriorated, you didn't even have to read embassy reporting. You just read the newspapers and would learn that there was a lot of turmoil on the streets of Teheran and other cities and that the provisional government had no control over it.

Q: But the Shah was admitted and what happened when the news came out?

LIMBERT: Not much. That was the interesting thing. October 22nd, as I said, we figured a day or two and we're toast. We probably will be dead or be captured. Something will happen. And nothing did.

Q: By the way, did you get any cable from Washington saying, "He's going to be admitted. Get more people out" or anything of that nature?

LIMBERT: No, not get more people out. It was, "Explain to the Iranian government the reasoning." The Iranian government barely existed at the time but that was a fact that people chose to ignore. But in terms of looking at partial evacuation, sending people out, that was simply never considered.

Q: Had the embassy beforehand said, "Okay, if the Shah's admitted we should do this or that?"

LIMBERT: In terms of preplanning that's a good question. I just don't remember. The correspondence on the issue was between the Department and Bruce Laingen and Bruce Laingen was told to share this with nobody and when you can't share it with anybody there's not much preplanning you can do. I don't know what preplanning you could have done, other than getting people out or shutting down the consular section. The day that they attacked, the consular section was shut down, which was a good thing.

Q: Were you getting anything from other embassies saying, "Fellows don't, if the Shah comes in ..." Were other people telling you what might happen? Was there much consultation with other embassies?

LIMBERT: The other embassies didn't know jack. They knew very little, as far as we could tell, at least in my contacts. My own family was very worried once this happened.

Q: So, then, what happened?

LIMBERT: Well, it was a Sunday, which was the first day of our work week. As I said there had not been much immediate response to the admission. I had been, for about the week before, traveling outside of Teheran, so I wasn't completely up to date on what was going on in the capital, but Sunday morning as I say was the beginning of our work week. Bruce Laingen and Victor Tomseth, head of political section and number two, plus one of our security officers went to the Foreign Ministry on an appointment that they had been seeking for a week before that, so it wasn't specifically related to embassy security. In the morning, groups had been marching by the embassy, going to a demonstration scheduled at the university. One of the parade routes for demonstrations at the university went by the front gate of the embassy. About 10:30 in the morning one of the groups stopped in front of the embassy, and began shouting slogans. That wasn't unusual but instead of continuing to march towards the university the demonstrators attacked the front gate.

We had some local security in police uniforms. Whoever they were, if they were actually police, Iranian police or just neighborhood vigilantes dressed up in police uniforms, they melted away. They were not going to confront the crowd. They came into the compound, they breached the gates. The gates were nothing like today's security arrangements, the barriers were nothing like you see today in embassies, with all the high tech stuff and the razor wire and the bollards and all that sort of thing. It was essentially an ornamental fence.

And they came into the compound. We shut down the doors of the chancery. We shut down the doors of the consulate building. The embassy is a series of buildings spread over about thirty acres in the middle of town. And figured that the best thing to do would be to shut them out physically, and keep them out until the host government could respond. As they had responded some nine months earlier, on February 14th, when a group had also attacked and the authorities did respond, and sent a force in to kick out the attackers. So we figured they would do something similar and in the meantime the best thing to do was to shut down and lock down the building.

Q: Then what? How about for you?

LIMBERT: I was in the main chancery. We were on the phone with Washington. It was like two or three in the morning, Sunday morning in Washington. It's an example I've always used. We got the Operations Center, they patched us through to either Hal Saunders, the assistant secretary for Near East, or one of the deputy assistant secretaries. I've used that example since when I noticed that recently some of our bureaus have appointed less than experienced people to be deputy assistant secretaries. I said, "Look, in a situation like that we needed somebody with judgment and experience on the other end of the line. I don't care how damn brilliant they are or who they know. We need somebody good." You can see of course by the results how effective that has been. But that's parenthetical.

We were on the phone with Washington. Ann Swift, who was our number two political officer, was the ranking Foreign Service person in the embassy at the time. She was on the phone with Washington. I got on the phone with the Iranian government. Mike Metrinko got on the phone with some of his contacts. First I called was the Foreign Ministry, then the prime minister's office. The Foreign Ministry was surreal. First of all I called and the woman at the other end thought I was Metrinko. We were two of the Persian speakers there and before I could describe what was going on, she said, "Oh, Mr. Metrinko, it's nice to talk to you. Those passports we sent over, are the visas ready yet?" And all I could say was, "Lady, one this isn't Metrinko, two if you don't do something about this situation you can kiss those visas of yours good-bye. You're never going to see them." I don't know if they ever saw them or not. But that was the tenor of the time. "I want my visa and I can shout my anti-American slogan at the same time." I called the prime minister's office and they reassured us me that, "Oh, don't worry, we're going to send some help. All these people want to do is read a statement and leave." I said, "That's fine. Let 'em read it quickly and get out of here before something happens." I kept reminding 'em, "Listen, you are responsible. This is your responsibility. Our safety, the safety of this compound, is your responsibility. If there is bloodshed, if somebody gets hurt, you will be responsible." That made no impact at all. They said that there's a force on the way or some group on the way to get these people out, and it will be there at any time, very soon. After a short period of time it became clear that no force was on the way, there was none one coming to help. So I called back, I pressed them, I said, "I don't see any evidence of this." "Oh, no, no, don't worry." And I said, "Well tell me what you are doing about this." And they said, (this is about eleven o'clock in the morning) "Oh, well, for this afternoon we've scheduled a meeting to decide what to do about it." I just hung up on this guy. I remember saying to Ann Swift, I said, "Ann, we're on our own. Whatever happens is here."

Again, presumably, had there been a functioning government able to do something, Hal Saunders in Washington could have woken up somebody at a high enough level to call someone in the Iranian government to get these people out and remind 'em of the seriousness. But there was no one to talk to. There was no one to answer the phone at the other side. All you could get was a lot of hand wringing.

Q: Was there the feeling that whatever power there was was in the hands of the ayatollahs and they weren't approachable?

LIMBERT: Well, we didn't know who was in charge at this point. We didn't know who these people were answering to. The people that we dealt with, which was the provisional government, was clearly powerless and unable to do anything.

Q: Well what was happening while you were making the call? Were people pounding on the door?

LIMBERT: Well, first they were outside the main building and then they got into the main building. They broke a window, and they pulled out some bars., They found a vulnerable spot. I don't know if they had cased the place or not but they found a vulnerable spot, pulled out some bars and got into the chancery basement. The marines tried to slow them down with teargas. Eventually we got everybody, including our Iranians employees, (there were probably more Iranian employees than American) up onto the second floor of the building, which is behind a steel door. We shut the steel door, and tried to delay. Eventually they got up the stairs, were outside the steel door. We weren't quite sure what was going on over at the consulate building. There were people whose offices were outside of the chancery. We weren't sure what happened to them. Our security officer earlier had gone out to try to defuse this. He eventually became a hostage or was taken prisoner.

So there we were. They were outside the door, we were inside the door and we didn't know what was going on. We were worried they might try to burn us out. As far as we knew there hadn't been any bloodshed. We hadn't seen anybody armed with anything but sticks at this point. As far as we were aware nobody had been hurt, from either side. No shots had been fired.

We were in radio contact with the chargï¿½ at the Foreign Ministry and we told him, "See what you can do there. You're better off there, if you can get some help for us. Don't come back here." And ever since that time, ever since that day, for the rest of my Foreign Service career I have been a great pain in the neck to my employees about radio communication, because I think it was a lifesaver for our people at the Foreign Ministry that day.

Anyway, so they were at the door. It was a stalemate. We had reached a stalemate but we were on our own.

Q: Were the marines restive as far as weapons and all that?

LIMBERT: I don't know if they were restive or not but they followed orders. My hat goes off to them. Marines don't like to surrender. Marines don't like to retreat. But they followed orders and they did not shoot their weapons. Had they done so, I would not be sitting here today. We know now that the students attacking us were prepared, if there had been bloodshed, to take the bodies out and parade them around to the crowd and that would have meant was instead of facing a thousand people we would have been facing 500,000 people. You whip up a mob with rumors and all the rest and say the marines are shooting women and unarmed demonstrators at the embassy. The situation could have gotten completely out of control. So hats off to the marines. The marines were inside. There were some marines over at the consulate building. There were marines who were off duty who were captured in their apartment.

The Americans and the Iranians in the consulate, were able to get out. As I mentioned, we weren't doing visa services that day and there was a direct door between the consulate and the alley, the small street, behind the compound and the students hadn't attacked from there. So a group of 'em slipped out. When they got out on the street of course the question is what do they do now? And I think half went right, half went left. Those that went right eventually made their way to safety and were hidden by the Canadians. There were six of them, including two spouses who were working as consular assistants. And the others were captured.

Q: So there you are behind the locked door.

LIMBERT: There behind the locked door, and people are destroying documents. We were in communication by telephone with Washington. We were in communication by radio with the chargï¿½ at the Foreign Ministry. But there we are. It's a standoff. What do you do?

Q: So what happened?

LIMBERT: Well, I did probably one of the most stupid things I've ever done in my Foreign Service career. I volunteered to go out and talk to these guys. I'm a Persian speaker, so perhaps I can go out and see if we can defuse this someway, or delay it, defuse it, divert it. We did not see these guys being armed or anybody getting hurt. So that's what I did. I went out, they opened the door, I went out the door and started talking to these guys. And at first they were shocked, 'cause they thought I was an Iranian. I kept reassuring them, "No, no, no, I'm not an Iranian, I'm an American employee of the embassy, you should get out of here." I took my most professorial tone with 'em and was as overbearing as I could be and saying, "You are where you should not be. You have no business here. You should get out as soon as you can. You are causing trouble. Who do you think you are?" So forth and so on. And they weren't having any of it.

I'll tell you a little story about this. About 1991 or '92 there was a made for TV movie about the hostage taking. It wasn't a great bit of moviemaking but it was not bad. And part of the movie shows this particular incident, where the actor playing me goes out to talk to these guys and gets taken. I was showing this at one point to an audience, using this as an example and one of the people in the audience, perhaps he didn't realize this character was supposed to be me and in this stage whisper said, "God, what an idiot!" although he didn't use the word "idiot." He used a more anatomical descriptor. True, I must admit he had a point. I've always called this the low point of my Foreign Service career and my least successful negotiation.

So I spent a few minutes palavering with these guys, who were high and nervous and they didn't know what was going to go on. They didn't know if the marines were going to come out shooting or not, so they didn't know what to expect. But I did see somebody with a pistol, at that point, which wasn't very reassuring. But anyway, I became a captive early on. And then they announced if we didn't open the door in five minutes they were going to shoot me and the security officer, whom they also had. Well, Ann Swift and Bruce Laingen, God love 'em both, they eventually agreed. They didn't call the bluff and they did open the door and then most of the staff was taken there. There were some people who locked themselves in the vault and they managed to hold out for another couple of hours.

Under normal circumstances there would have been plenty of time for the host country, for the Iranian authorities, to send some help, but they did not. And to this day, Stu, I blame those who had the power to react and didn't take the responsibility to do so.

Q: Looking back on it and knowing sort of the Iranian bureaucratic psyche and all, do you have any idea why somebody didn't say, "This will not stand?" Maybe they didn't have anybody to call.

LIMBERT: Well, the so-called Provisional Government, which was the official government that we dealt with, which ran the Foreign Ministry and the Interior Ministry and the Defense Ministry and the Agriculture Ministry and everything else, had no power and no muscle to do something. There was nobody they could call on. Power had devolved into the hands of a parallel shadow government, called the Revolutionary Institutions. It included the Revolutionary Guards, it included neighborhood committees and they did not answer to "the government." They answered to their own shadowy chain of authority.

But they could have reacted just as well. The story I heard was that when this happened the Foreign Minister at the time, Ebrahim Yazdi, who was not any great fan of ours but realized the damage that this event could do, one to his view of the revolution and the new Islamic republic and two, to his political career, got in a car and drove two hour south of Teheran to the holy city of Qom, where Ayatollah Khomeini was and said, "This is a terrible thing. This will do serious damage." And Khomeini's reaction was, "Well, get 'em out! If that's true, get 'em out!" So Yazdi thought he had his instructions. He gets in the car to go back and as he's driving back he turns on the news. On the news it says the Ayatollah Khomeini has endorsed the taking of the embassy.

There are different theories of what happened. One was that there were either spontaneous or staged popular demonstrations of support to the actions of the students. Once Khomeini heard that he felt boxed in.

Q: Was he riding a tiger?

LIMBERT: Yeah, he was in a corner. He did not want to go against the so-called popular will. His style was to lead from behind. The popular will had endorsed this and he wasn't going to fly in the face of it. That's one theory.

Second theory, related to that, was that he and his associates' greatest concern at the time was that the revolution not be hijacked by the left. They felt under siege from two directions: one, from the monarchists and those bent on restoring the Shah, presumably with help from the United States but the more serious threat was from the leftists, who had participated in the revolution and were now claiming a share of power, presumably with the backing of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union might make a power grab. And one way of doing so would be to have its agents seize the American embassy. So one of the first things Khomeini did was to send his son, Ahmad Khomeini, to the embassy, to see who are these people, who did this. The real question was, are these leftists or somebody else? And apparently Ahmad Khomeini came back and said, "No, they're not leftists, they're sincere, believing Muslim kids." So at that point he was even less willing to take decisive action. Of course, when he was not willing to do it, then who was? So you had political cowardice raised to the tenth power.

Well, once that happened, then the Provisional Government had no choice. It realized that it was completely irrelevant and simply resigned. And our goose was cooked. I remember hearing all this, about one, the endorsement, and two, the resigning of the Provisional Government and I remember saying to myself, "This does not look good."

Q: We're a movie generation and I can think of several instances. One is Doctor Zhivago and the colonel who tries to stop a mob of soldiers deserting, who kind of laugh at him and eventually kill him. The other one is in the Charge of the Light Brigade, where they, the Brits are under truce and give a ceasefire to leave this fort and then are slaughtered by the unmentionables outside and all that. So what happened? Were your thoughts at the time, "This is going to take a while to sort out or God knows what's going to happen to us?"

LIMBERT: Three things, probably. One was, very glad to be alive. I didn't know whether we were going to survive this or not. We didn't know what was going to happen. We were facing a mob. So after this immediate capture was over, the fact that I was still alive, that was a pretty good thing, given the alternative.

Second was that, "This can't go on very long. Somebody is going to sort this out. Whoever is in charge cannot permit something like this to stand, and in a day, two days, three days, it'll be sorted out and either these guys will leave or we'll be put on a plane.The third was a little different, when we discovered that the ostensible reason they were holding us was the return of the Shah. my first thought was, that's absurd. Then after a while I thought, "Well, what's the Shah ever done for me? Sounds okay to me, if they want us to return the Shah, if they want us to throw in Henry Kissinger in the bargain we can do that, too. It's all right. Sounds like a reasonable trade."

Q: First place, what about the local employees, the Iranian employees who were in the consulate and then in your, in the safe area, to begin with, behind the locked door? What happened?

LIMBERT: Most of them I think were questioned and then let go. Eventually I think a number ended up here in the States. It wasn't pleasant for them. A number of them I think had a pretty hard time but most of 'em, drivers, accountants, travel clerks, pouch room people, commercial assistants, people like that, were questioned and let go and told, "Don't go anywhere." The biggest problem for them was they lost their jobs. Working for the U.S. embassy, in its day, was a good job to have.

I'll tell you a story about that. I was staying with in-laws in those months, but I had rented a house and was fixing it up. It was walking distance to the embassy, in very nice neighborhood, a house with a small garden and would be very nice for my family when they could come.

Q: Where was your family?

LIMBERT: They were in Saudi Arabia at the time. And the landlady was one of our Iranian employees at the embassy Many years later when I was back in the States I got a call from her saying that she wanted her rent, five years worth of rent, or something like that. And I said, "Well, you're not going to get it from me. Try the State Department." But apparently she had left the country after this had happened, and had asked her maid to stay in the house. Of course the maid exercised squatter's rights and eventually took possession of the house.

Q: Let's go back. The door opens and then what happens to you all?

LIMBERT: Well, we're tied up, blindfolded and led out the front door and there are very famous pictures of that incident, with us being led down the front stairs. I remember it was a cold and rainy day, and it was good to get out of the gas and smoke inside. I felt good getting out in the fresh air and being alive. Then we were taken across the embassy grounds to I think it was either the ambassador's or the DCM's house and put in rooms there.

Q: Were you being kicked or pummeled or anything like that?

LIMBERT: No. I wasn't.

Q: Was anybody talking to you while you were doing this?

LIMBERT: Once we got there we started talking with the students. There was no plan. As far as we could tell, these guys did not know what they were going to do next. Now they had done this, the question was kind of "Now what?" There was no particular plan. The plan was just to take the embassy and improvise from there. So one of the things they tell you in a situation like this, I remembered this from a half-day course I had taken before, was to establish some common ground with these people. They're less likely to kill you if they see you as an individual. So I started talking, just talked with them I might with my own students.

Q: So how did things develop then, the first day or two?

LIMBERT: They deteriorated seriously. Basically we were waiting for somebody to come around and get us out of there and nobody ever came. The first day or two we were able to listen to news and the students were just dying to know how they were being portrayed in the international news. We listened to Teheran news, we listened to BBC Persian. But things took a bad turn the next day. I spent the night in the cook's room of the DCM's house and the next morning, they came in about nine or ten o'clock in the morning and dragged us out and tied us to chairs in the living room and blindfolded. Sitting there in this room blindfolded, tied up to chairs and hearing the screaming crowds outside. That was about as bad as it ever got for me. I didn't know what was going to happen but I figured if those people outside got in either they were going to shoot us right then or if those mobs got into the embassy we were going to be dead.

Q: Were your captors saying, "Keep quiet."

LIMBERT: They said, "Don't talk to each other." That's all they said. They didn't say much, at that point.

Q: Did you have the feeling anybody was in charge?

LIMBERT: Didn't know. They were doing this for some reason but rule one of being prisoner is you don't expect and logic or reason for what happens. You cast aside logic and reason at that point. That's the way you survive.

Q: And don't get into emotional argument with your captors.

LIMBERT: No.

Q: This is not an experience that we're really trained to take care of and I would think this could be traumatic for some, a real breakdown.

LIMBERT: You do whatever you can do to keep other people calm, but you couldn't do much, beyond day one, because we couldn't communicate with each other. I think, for the most part, from what I saw and heard, most people took this very professionally.

Q: Well then, how did things develop?

LIMBERT: As I said, very badly.

Q: You were all put into, you were hearing this mob outside and then what happened?

LIMBERT: We're sitting there. The radio is on. I'm thinking the worst possible thoughts. It's very bizarre, I'll never forget this, they're playing the Funeral Music for Queen Mary by Henry Purcell. Remember A Clockwork Orange? It's the music from A Clockwork Orange. It's beautiful, absolutely gorgeous music. But not what I really wanted to hear. Not very upbeat. And this went on. We were in this state for a couple of hours until around noontime they fed us, brought in some food. I forget what it was. I took that as a good sign. I said, "Well, if they were going to shoot us they probably wouldn't feed us." And that went on through most of the day. But it's amazing what you can get used to. I think eventually the put us in separate bedrooms. I remember one of the colleagues needed some medicine and I took the role of designated nagger and I would just nag at them to get him his medicine, because they couldn't understand his English. But again there was a sense of not knowing what was coming next. Once again, I think we were all grasping at that straw that, " well this doesn't happen and this can't go on and somebody's going to straighten it out." So that was my thought through the next few days. I remember hearing the news about the resigning of the Provisional Government. Not good news. And so we spent the next few days in various rooms of either the DCM's or the ambassador's residence, sleeping on the floor, tied up.

The one thing I do remember from that time was they gave me a Time magazine to read and there was an article in there about admitting the Shah to the U.S. and in this article they quoted President Carter as saying he was opposed to it but agreed anyway. And when he agreed, though, he said, "What are you going to advise me to do when our embassy is overrun and our people are taken hostage?" You could imagine what that made me feel like.

Q: Now, were these students, they're called students, I don't know how appropriate the term is, but were there English speakers? Did you get the feeling this was coming from the lower class students or were these, was there a cadre who were, maybe been in the United States and maybe spoke pretty good English or not?

LIMBERT: There were some who'd been in the States and others who also spoke some English. But most of them I recognized as the kind of young people knew, because I had taught in Iran before. They were from very traditional families, from provincial towns, again, very traditional places. They were book-smart. Many of them were science and engineering students. A sad commentary on science and engineering but science and engineering students generally are the second tier below medical students in Iran. These are people who studied hard enough to get into good universities. That was very competitive in Iran in those days. Maybe 100,000 people might take the entrance exam for 12,000 places and the technical faculties were especially competitive. So they were book-smart. They were people who studied their lessons a lot but from very traditional backgrounds, very limited knowledge of the world. There were some who knew more, were more sophisticated, but that was a special cadre. It wasn't the ones we saw very much of. The ones we saw were the ones who brought us the food, pulled guard duty, that kind of stuff and these were 20-year-olds from provincial towns who'd probably never been much of anywhere.

Q: Well how did things, sort of after a day or two, shake off? They take off tying you up and the blindfolds and all?

LIMBET: Oh, the blindfolds they would take off during most of the day. They only used the blindfolds when they were going to move us somewhere. I don't remember the exact day but it was a after few days, they came in in the middle of the night and said, "Okay, get up, we're going." My first thought, "Oh, that's good. Finally somebody has done something." But I got hustled off with some others and got in the back of a car. We drove for a while. I ended up, with a group of others, in a villa up in the northern part of town. What had happened, I learned subsequently, there had been rumors of some rescue attempt and so they took some of us and scattered us around the city. So this was a villa that had obviously belonged to some wealthy Iranian who'd either been executed or had taken off, because his shirts were still hanging in the closet. And so I ended up in the bedroom, had a mattress on the floor. Our public affairs officer was there and one of our communicators was there. And the three of us just sat there for about ten days or two weeks. There were other people also in the house.

Q: Was there any real communication with the people who were tending you or not?

LIMBERT: Not really. I, again, I had the advantage. I asked them for some books in Persian. They brought me some books in Persian. I would read something and I would use it to begin a conversation. I would say, "Could you explain this idea to me? Explain what this is about. What does the author mean here?" Or "Here's a word I don't understand." And then we'd end up talking about that. That was about the extent of the interaction.

Q: Was there any attempt to get to you, or I guess Metrinko was the other one, but to get to you, to act as, one to harangue you or two to get you to divulge information? Was there any

LIMBERT: Not at that point. The haranguing was pretty half hearted.

Q: But so far you're just sitting in a bedroom. It's a lot more fun out in the street, with everybody shouting. Mob action doesn't work very well sort of one on one.

LIMBERT: No. There were some interrogations later on, half hearted stuff. In terms of trying to convince me of something, they didn't do much. I know that others got into more extended arguments. I wasn't really interested in getting in political discussions with them. When they would try, I would say, "Listen, you don't do a political discussion under these conditions. If you want a free discussion you need a free setting. If you want to talk about this you let us go and we'll go sit in a cafe somewhere and we'll talk about it. But not under these conditions." Again, one of the things they taught in this three-hour course, whatever it was, is avoid the political discussions. They're not trying to convince you. If they tried to convince you they wouldn't have done what they did. And I'm not going to convince them. I can work on them psychologically and I did, to catch them out in little lies and things. One of the things I liked to do was to catch them out in a lie somewhere and I would say, "Oh, it's really too bad that you're lying because to do that means that your prayers and your fasts are invalid and that's really too bad, isn't it?" Just kind of get under their skin a little bit or I would say things like, "That coat you're wearing, I recognize it. That belongs to one of us, doesn't it. That's stolen goods and what kind of a person steals or uses stolen goods? I'm sure if you had asked the owner he would have been happy to have you use it." Or I'd say, "If you say prayers on a usurped area, or on somebody else's property without their permission, those prayers are not valid. Too bad. People used to visit my house and before they would pray they would always ask permission." Little psychological warfare. I don't know if it made any impact or not. Some of these guys were simple enough that it would. Made me feel a little better, anyway.

Q: This whole thing lasted, what

LIMBERT: 14 months.

Q: Early days, were you untied? Were you sort of making a home of where you were?

LIMBERT: What do they say, "First cell, first love?" Wherever you were you could adjust to that. You got accustomed to it. You said, "Okay, I'll make my nest here for the time being and see whatever happens." And basically what you learn is that you live an hour at a time or a day at a time or a week at a time. I don't remember when it was, but there must have been a point at which we figured this is more than we had bargained for. I remember, the attack happened on a Sunday, and I had an airline ticket on Friday to go to Saudi Arabia to visit my family. The first day I kept thinking, "Boy am I going to have a story to tell!" And then as this got on I said, "I hope I get out in time so I don't miss that flight." Well, of course, as things went on, it dragged on and on. When the message really came home to me was after the first Christmas in 1979. I got a care package from my family and there were some books in it and the books were things like War and Peace, The Brothers Karamazov, Middlemarch, average length about 1100 pages. And I'm thinking, "Someone is trying to tell me something."

Q: First place, around you, did you get the feeling that people in authority were beginning to take over? Were you hearing voices giving, did there seem to be somebody in charge?

LIMBERT: They had their routines, they had their shifts. I don't know what their routines were or what their organization was but somebody out there was obviously running this thing, if only to manage the food and the other logistics. I do remember, this must have been after a month and a half or so, I was back in the embassy compound and they came over and they pulled me out, it was during the day, to an interrogation. I went over and they took me to my own office and there was a guy sitting there with a burn bag over his head, so I wouldn't know him. And I'm thinking, "Now what's wrong with this picture? I'm supposed to have the burn bag over my head, not him!" And it was funny, he asked me about the 1953 coup, the coup that overthrew Mossadegh, organized by Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA. He asked, "What was your role in that?" And I said, "Well, I was about ten years old at the time. I don't think I had much of a role." And he said, "What do you know about it?" I said, "Basically what I've read." And he said, "What have you read?" I said, "Well I read this book by Professor Richard Cottam at the University of Pittsburgh." And he said, "Oh, you mean the book Nationalism in Iran?" I was very surprised because very few people in Iran knew about that book and it was definitely not available there. It was written in English. I don't know if it had been translated into Persian. Maybe there was a bootleg translation somewhere, but very few Iranians that I knew were familiar with it, although it was one of the standard books on the Mossadegh period. So obviously I was dealing with somebody who was a cut above the 19-year-olds that we saw most of the time. But in terms of the interrogation, I don't know what they were after. They asked me, "What Iranians do you have contact with?" So I said, "Well, the guy at the dry cleaners, the baker, Ayatollah Montazeri, this minister, that minister" Basically I gave them everybody I could think of. I figured if I gave them three hundred names and let them sort out if there was anybody there. But I couldn't see any rhyme or reason to what they were doing.

Q: So you didn't feel all of a sudden the big guys are taking over now? There was not that feeling that the intelligence officers were all of a sudden in charge?

LIMBERT: No, not from my point of view. Obviously, there were people there who were different from the rank and file. Clearly there was a hierarchy. There was a rank and file and then there was a leadership. And later on I learned about the so-called revelations. These were embassy documents that they had recovered and were selectively releasing in order to incriminate other Iranians whom they didn't like. So there clearly was a strategy. There was a method in their madness. There was an aim to what they were doing, which went well beyond us. What became clear pretty quickly was that in this thing we were not the focus of their interest. The Shah was not the focus of their interest.

Q: The Shah as a factor had sort of faded away?

LIMBERT: Yeah, I think so. The Shah was not the focus of their interest, even the United States was not the focus of their interest. They were playing an Iranian power game and there were people within the Iranian political system who figured out very quickly how they could use this event, and all the excitement and fervor generated by this event, to further their political ambitions. They did so very well, to give the devil his due.

Q: John, we've got you stuck in a cell. You were saying that you felt that you were part of, you were pawns, a part of the game that was being played by the Iranians. I suppose you were really thinking about, did you feel that you were part, at the time did you have any idea that this was going on, that you were part of the Iranian power struggle?

LIMBERT: The awakening came gradually, but I did get an inkling of it in a couple of ways. At one point, I think I mentioned when they questioned me the focus was not on what the U.S. was doing or the U.S. embassy was doing. They wanted to know, "What Iranians did you know?" And I knew three thousand Iranians so I started reciting my list of three thousand Iranians, until they realized that was a dead end. But the other piece was, sometime in late February, early March, the people in the next cell stole a transistor radio from the guards and smuggled it to me. So I was able to listen to Radio Teheran broadcasts. Until that time we were cut off from news, except what bits and pieces I could pick up. It was the first time I learned, for example, that the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan. I hadn't know that had happened. Then the students were holding media sessions. They would hold a press conference, and they would call it "a press conference with revelations" and they would publish a series of embassy documents. They were going through embassy documents and there were a lot of them. And they were hunting for Iranians they didn't like. Not royalists. They were after nationalists, secularists, liberals, people who had been part of their own coalition and selectively releasing documents about them. And they were holding press conferences and presumably they had enough allies in the system that they had access to radio and TV. And their targets, as I said, were not former royal officials or Americans, but people associated with the old National Front, people associated with the social democratic movement, people they called "the liberals." I think they shared Ronald Reagan's view of "the liberals." And they would go through the embassy files, they would find a mention of one of these people, they would find a meeting with one of these people and use that fact to launch a campaign against their former coalition partners.

In other words, I sometime compare what was going on at that points to a chess game but it was more like a three dimensional chess game. A three dimensional chess game that became a contact sport.

Q: Let's talk a bit about your conditions. First place, how did, in the beginning you were all isolated?

LIMBERT: No, we were in groups but we weren't supposed to talk to each other, not that we had much to talk about. But we might be four in an area, six in an area but we were not supposed to talk to each other. Then sometime around January they put a group of us in this basement of one of the buildings, a large open room and they set up cubicles there. It was called the "Mushroom Inn." Although, again, we weren't supposed to talk to each other we could see each other and eventually I ended up playing chess with one of the other hostages. It was, for me, anyway, a source of reassurance that other people were there.

Q: Were you called upon at all, because there weren't many Farsi speakers, were there? Mike Metrinko and you

LIMBERT: There were really four pretty good Persian speakers: myself, Mike Metrinko, Barry Rosen, who was the press officer and Vic Tomseth. But Vic Tomseth wasn't with us. He was downtown at the Foreign Ministry. So among our immediate group I guess there were three. The interesting thing was that the common factor among those three was my wife, because she had been a teacher to both Mike Metrinko and Barry Rosen in their Peace Corps days.

Q: I know Mike Metrinko, when I interviewed him, was sort of ticked off because when they were all herded together and at one point somebody was showing them something in Persian and they said, "Oh, go to Metrinko. He speaks Persian." Mike did not want to be identified as a Persian speaker, because he felt this might single him out. Were we used at all to explain, one of your keepers didn't speak English and wanted to get something done, were you used in that way?

LIMBERT: No, I certainly didn't want to play that role. What I could do and did do occasionally, was resolve an issue. For example if somebody needed medication, if somebody was sick or there was an emergency and I was within earshot and somebody couldn't understand, then I would intervene. But ever since that incident during the attack, when I went out the door to negotiate with those guys, it was no secret that I was a Persian speaker. I didn't make any particular effort to hide it.

Q: Did you get any feel for your keepers? Where they came from, what they were?

LIMBERT: As a matter of fact, yes. Maybe ten years earlier I had spent a number of years at the University of Shiraz teaching. They reminded me in many ways of a lot of my students. They were book smart. They came from the smaller provincial towns, from very traditional families and when they got to Shiraz university they found it a disturbing hybrid. It followed an American program. Most of the other universities were based on European models. Shiraz was based on American models. It had semesters, it had credit hours, everybody had to take four semesters of English. There were foreign professors. A lot of the Iranian professors had studied in the States. Some of the courses were in English. Not all of them, but many of them were. And the spirit of the place, it's hard to say exactly how, was considered more American than Iranian.

And that created problems for some of the students coming out of very traditional backgrounds. Their views and values that they'd taken in in their homes and their towns clashed with a more open-minded, pluralistic view that they found at the university. Don't ask me why I was doing this but one semester I was teaching sociology, and the subject matter in sociology was directly out of some American textbook and it didn't go over very well. It was hard to understand for some of these guys. They'd never dealt with these issues in such a way. I can remember trying to explain the Oedipus complex to them at one point. They were polite. They were scratching their heads and saying, "What in the world is he talking about?" So that kind of clash was set up.

So when I encountered these people in Teheran, I said, "Well, I can recognize that. I can recognize where they've come from, what kind of background they're out of." They were smart enough, they worked hard enough, to get into universities. Many of them were engineering and technical students and that's very difficult. The universities are extremely competitive, particularly the technical fields. So they were smart enough, in the sense of book smart, to do it. In terms of experience of the world, zero.

Q: So these were real students?

LIMBERT: Most of them, as far as I could tell.

Q: One of the stories that came out, at one point, there was a lot of misinformation, but I remember during the hostage time reading that these really weren't students but they were street people, more or less or something.

LIMBERT: No, most of them were students. At least a lot of them, for a while. Sometimes they would come to me and they'd want me to help them with their lessons. I told them that I couldn't help them with their thermodynamics or their material sciences but I could with their English. Interesting postscript: after I got out and came back here, a lot of Iranians asked me not were these people really students but they said, "Were they really Iranians?" Because, they said, in their view no Iranian could have done what they did. The way it was put to me, "We Iranians may do a lot of outrageous things but one thing we would never do is mistreat a guest in our own house. That flies in the face of every tradition, every command. It strikes at the base of our culture." So in their mind, no Iranian could have done that.

Q: One, were your keepers sort of keeping an eye on each other? Was it sort of a make sure everybody was being morally straight or something in this situation?

LIMBERT: I think so. I think they had to worry about their own rogue elements. For example, as near as I could tell, this was pretty much a seat of the pants operation but for example if they got near us most of the time they did not come armed because they didn't want one of us trying to take their weapon away. Occasionally there would be words between one of us and one of them and generally they would move that guard around, try to keep him out of contact because we were in close quarters for a long time. Politically, one of the things that we tried to do and I tried to do was sow a few seeds of distrust, to drop hints, when I picked up something from some source like the radio or somewhere else, I might just drop a hint that I knew something that I wasn't supposed to know, 'cause I wanted them to think that I was getting it from one of their own people.

Q: Did you ever get the feeling that a new supervisor had come in and said, "Okay, I'm going to clean up this mess" and all of a sudden everybody, the keepers were more snapping to attention? Because over a period of time the prisoner-keeper thing can kind of meld into one amorphous mass or something.

LIMBERT: I guess there were attempts from time to time but they never took. The exception to that, I think I may have mentioned this, was at one point people came in at two in the morning and dragged us out, lined us up against a wall and pretended they were going to shoot us. I guess that doesn't fall into the same category.

Q: Well, no, but I mean, what was behind that?

LIMBERT: Never knew. We never figured it out. They came in and dragged us out of our places, lined us up, started chambering rounds and said, "Okay, go back." Never figured it out. I've often asked myself what it was.

Q: Looking back on it, could you correlate the time that that happened with events that at that point you didn't know about but that were happening externally?

LIMBERT: No, I don't think so. I think, like at Abu Ghraib, somebody got it in his head this would be a fun thing to do and was able to bring in whoever was there. Wiser heads were not there or were looking the other way. "Wouldn't this be fun to do?" and they got a group of their buds together. That's about the only explanation I can come up with.

Q: Did you get any political speeches?

LIMBERT: Occasionally, but, again, they were half-hearted. Most of the folks I was dealing with were not what I'd call the political brains of the outfit. They were the foot soldiers. And, finally, they tell you in your training, (I think I had a half-day course at one point in my service, which actually stood me in pretty good stead) "Stay away from politics. This is not a situation in which you want to argue politics with anyone." For two reasons: one, it's not an argument between equals and, two, they're not really looking for a discussion. So if you said to them, "I really like your announcement number 71. However, in point seven, subparagraph four, subpart two, I would quibble with this, that and the other." No, that doesn't go. And the conventional wisdom is stay away from the politics. Do engage these people if they will engage, but engage them on subjects like sports, music, history, family, poetry, all of these things. Things that are politically neutral. I found that worked fine. If someone was insistent upon a political discussion with me, my final thing was to say, "Look, I'm happy to talk about this with you but not under these circumstances. "Free discussion" and that was a phrase that was going around Teheran a lot, "demands a free setting. So if the two of us can go sit in a teahouse somewhere and talk about this, I'm perfectly happy to argue, but not under these circumstances."

Q: How did things progress, as far as how they handled you over time? Were you moved around a lot, were you separated? Did there seem to be a calculation or anything going on?

LIMBERT: One of the things I guess every prisoner has learned since biblical times is that there is no reason or rationality to what happens to you. You are in the hands of an irrational system and the sooner you adapt to that the better. So you don't ask questions like, "Why are they doing this or what's the reasoning behind it?" They're doing it because they can do it, I suppose.

Q: I spent four years as an enlisted man in the air force. I learned that, too.

LIMBERT: Exactly. When I did end up with a cellmate, he had been an enlisted man in the army and he said that was good training. You don't ask why. It's just going to be the way it is. Maybe they had a system, maybe they had a reason, but you accept the ultimate absurdity and irrationality and unpredictability of it and things go a lot easier.

Q: You can only speak for yourself, of course, but whatever communication you had with your fellows, about, feel the United States had let you down or did you have any feel for what was happening?

LIMBERT: Not really. I don't think I ever thought that. I think the Iranians would have liked us to think that but you could see how difficult this was going to be, when there's no government to talk to, when power had been left to the mobs in the street. What are you going to do? What alternatives do they have? So I never felt that. And then there were occasionally, between the lines of letters or something we might see, hints of how much concern there was back here.

Q: Was there any concern, not on the specifics of what happened, the abortive attempt to rescue you at Desert One but just in general, was there a concern, "I hope they" meaning the U.S. government "don't do something stupid like carpet bomb Teheran or something like that"?

LIMBERT: Well, of course one feels that way but, once again, a little bit like your experience in the military, I had been in the government, we'd all been in the government long enough to know if they're going to do something stupid, they will.

Q: Were you able to, were there sort of topics of conversation, without moving your lips, talking to your comrades and all?

LIMBERT: Very difficult. We had notes, we had ways of passing notes back and forth. We had tap codes with each other but the subject matter, because our outside contacts were so limited, was "How are you? Who have you seen? What happened? Are you okay? Is somebody else okay? Where have you been?" This kind of internal thing. "Do you know anything?" For example I found out about our six colleagues who escaped with help from the Canadians. I was able to spread that around. People who knew about the rescue mission spread that around. People who knew that the Shah had died spread that around. That kind of thing.

Q: Looking back on it and putting it in chronology, chronological order, did you see any reaction to what happened to you all after the abortive rescue attempt?

LIMBERT: In terms of treatment?

Q: Or movement or any

LIMBERT: We were moved out of Tehran after April. What happened was this. We knew things were coming to a crisis of some kind. You could read that almost in the tone of the demonstrations in front of the embassy and there was kind of a growing hysteria in these demonstrations.

Q: You could hear the demonstrations?

LIMBERT: Yes.

Q: And you were still in the embassy?

LIMBERT: Still in the embassy.

Q: And these were usually after the mosque meetings or

LIMBERT: No, these were almost daily events. The tempo of them picked up in April 1980. I didn't know it, but this was the period when relations were broken, officially and there was a sense of a growing crisis. And so you had a much more strident and shrill tone of the demonstrations. You could almost tell the difference between sort of the large scale, religious based demonstrations and the much more shrill and strident and smaller leftist demonstrations that were going on outside. The latter had an almost hysterical quality about them.

Q: I would think that, obviously you're a political officer but you're not able to get out and mix and mingle.

LIMBERT: No. Very frustrating, that.

Q: But at the same time, when you talk about the religious one and the leftist one, I think this would be chalk and cheese. They be opposed to each other. What you knew later on, what was

LIMBERT: Of course they were, but they were still part of the coalition. There were tensions within the coalition. We talked about the power fight and the capture of the embassy and how it led to the nationalists, the moderates, and the social democrats, being pushed out of the coalition. Later on, you had groups like the Mujahedin-e-Khalq and the various Marxist groups being pushed out of the coalition. These groups were as stridently anti-American as any of the religious groups, perhaps even more so. But the mainline religious groups, also saw them as a threat and as competitors for power and eventually turned on them. But if you're talking April of 1980, the time of the break in relations, the leftist groups were still active and still at least nominally inside the coalition.

Q: Well looking back on it, I want to protest, I would have thought, when somebody takes over your embassy that would breaks relations with them.

LIMBERT: Very interesting question. Logically, yes, but the problem was, the functioning government, such as it was, had distanced itself from this event. They said, "Look, we don't have anything to do with this. We're as appalled by this event as you are." The problem was, they had no power to do anything. So there was this 1 facade or pretense of correct relations. For example, our three people at the Foreign Ministry were using a Foreign Ministry telex to communicate with the State Department.

Q: This was Bruce Laingen and Victor Tomseth.

LIMBERT: And Mike Howland, yes, exactly.

Q: It's obviously a very peculiar situation.

LIMBERT: And it was useful, I guess, for us to maintain this fiction for a number of months, in the hope that the so-called government, whatever government there was, could take some action. And that was the whole basis of the aborted UN mission that went to Teheran in February-March of '80. And at one point it looked like we were going to be turned over to "the government,". And that deal fell apart at the last moment.

Q: Did you get any feel from your keepers, again, were they showing disdain for the government?

LIMBERT: Yes, if the subject came up. I don't know if it was disdain for the government as an institution. These were twenty-year-old revolutionaries. This was right out of Chairman Mao's mythology. So institutions like government, like ministries, don't interest them very much. They don't care about them. They also had particularly bad feelings for the foreign minister at the time, Sadeqh Ghotzbadeh. They just disliked him viscerally. He was executed later.

Q: Did you get any feel that, again, your keepers, were they particularly religious or were they coming out of a sort of a non-religious, revolutionary

LIMBERT: No, they were religious. As I mentioned, many of them I think were from very traditional backgrounds - conservative towns and very traditional families. They were not religious scholars. They had not studied religion. They were not clerics or seminarians. They were in secular universities. They were studying I think mostly engineering. But they were religious, I would say, in a traditional way. Their knowledge of their religion, in terms of the history or theology, was very limited.

Q: Find yourself quoting the Koran to them or not?

LIMBERT: We ended up discussing passages of the Koran and what they meant and I occasionally used what Arabic I knew against them.

Q: What about living conditions, or food? How was the food?

LIMBERT: Again, one of the things they taught us in this training course was "Whatever it is, eat it. You will survive." I hadn't been in the army but I'm told if you had been in the army it would have been good training for the food. It wasn't very good but it kept us alive. I think what happened was that the chargï¿½ d'affaires' cook, a Pakistani, stayed on for a while and he did some cooking for us. He did the best he could with whatever was available.

Q: Did you get any feeling for looting of the embassy? Were people showing up with clothing or watches or what have you from embassy quarters?

LIMBERT: As a matter of fact, they did. One day while we were still in this large communal area, some fellow walked in wearing our security officer's jacket or overcoat. These kids didn't have a lot of money, so this was a chance for them to get some nice clothes. So he was wearing this jacket and the security officer said, "Hey, that's my jacket, that's my jacket." So when he came near me, I said, "It's too bad, isn't it?" He said, "Why?" "All your prayers are all your fasts are invalid, now, because you have taken stolen goods and you have taken them without the consent of the owner. And as I understand things, that means that everything else that you do is invalid." Dig at them a little bit. But, yeah, they did do that. They took jewelry, they took watches. I'm sure that's been redistributed.

I did lose a few things. I had a very nice collection of Iranian music on tape, in those days it was reel to reel tape, that I had made over many years and I had taped things from the radio, from archives. Some of it was quite rare. And I remember at one point being in the basement of the embassy and I was close to the wall and I could hear some of my music being played. Those bastards, they stole my music!

Q: Did you have a problem, either internally or with your fellow inmates, of making sure that they didn't get too mad, making sure that, there's no point in stirring up the keepers?

LIMBERT: I don't know. I assume so but since I was mostly in solitary I don't have any first hand knowledge of that. Then when I did end up with someone else, with Col. Leland Holland, the military attachï¿½, he was very cool. He was very professional. But I could hear, for example, one of the other military colleagues who was very good at provoking, or abusing them, but seemed to know just how far to go and to keep it verbal. I am sure that among other situations there may have been that. I just don't have any first hand knowledge of it.

Q: First place, what happened, in retrospect but, in looking at it, what did they do after the abortive attempt?

LIMBERT: They came in, they told us, pack up, you're moving. Of course we had been moved around a lot, usually from room to room or building to building, but now they said, "No, no, this is a long move. So prepare for that." And they put us in vans and cars, around sundown, and scattered us around the country. Talk about things being stolen - Col. Holland said later that one of his worst experiences was being blindfolded, having his hands tied and being taken around the country in his own car. "The bastards stole my car and then used it to move me around the country!" But anyway, we were in a van. I ended up in Esfahan, which was about three hundred kilometers south of Teheran.

Q: So you were there about how long?

LIMBERT: Where?

Q: In Esfahan.

LIMBERT: Let's see, it would have been from April until August of '80.

Q: And what were your conditions there?

LIMBERT: Physically they were probably a little bit better, in the sense we were in somebody's private house that these guys had confiscated, but the difficulty there was the isolation. I had very little contact with anyone else. I was in solitary there the whole time. And the fact psychologically that the farther away we were from Teheran, there was absolutely no chance of our being released.

Q: Were you able to take books with you?

LIMBERT: There were books. There were a lot of books around. That was basically the activity, reading, and then they showed up with some music tapes at one point. They even let me watch a little bit of the 1980 Olympics.

Q: And you were there, you say, from April until August. And then what happened?

LIMBERT: They moved us all back to Teheran.

Q: Did you get any feel that something was happening, anything

LIMBERT: No, that was the hard part. The only thing I found out, and this was shortly after we got to Esfahan, was about the rescue mission. I did learn about that. I stole a newspaper and there was a sketchy account of it. I knew about the rescue mission but that was about it. There wasn't much else. They weren't letting anything slip. Oh, and the other thing I found out, in July, was that the Shah had died.

Q: The death of the Shah and the royal family was no longer on the front burner of the revolution, was it?

LIMBERT: I don't think so. It did remove the pretext for us being there.

Q: How about Khomeini, Ayatollah Khomeini? Was he somebody who was quoted or was he beyond your ken?

LIMBERT: Well beyond our ken. Of course, he was the whole reason we were there, because he, in the earliest days had endorsed or blessed the taking of the embassy. Some people say he was railroaded or cornered into it, but no matter. He joined that caravan and so there we were.

Q: But were your keepers quoting Khomeini? Was he that type of figure or was it

LIMBERT: Not necessarily. Occasionally they would say something that was clearly not them and I'd think, "That had to come from Khomeini." Something like, "We don't like the East and we don't like the West." Something like that.

Q: Did anything change up to the point where you were going to be released, up to that time was there any particular change?

LIMBERT: Change in ...

Q: Conditions, attitude,

LIMBERT: I think the biggest change, after we got back in August happened once the Iran-Iraq War started in September. That was, I think that was a tremendous shock to the Iranians. Up until then I think they had been kind of playacting at revolution and now all of a sudden things got much more serious. A very bloody war and the Iranians took some serious losses at the beginning.

Q: Was the effect of, at that point the Iranians were beginning to send lots of young men into the battle with very little training and they lost sort of the cream of the crop, very much like World War I, with all the armies on the Western Front but was this reflected, were students going in there saying, "Poor so and so, he fell." Were you getting that sort of thing?

LIMBERT: Not specifically. We knew some of them were going to go off and fight. The other thing was, they got very interested in some of our military people all of a sudden, because they now had knowledge and experience that would have been useful to them. Most of the Iranians' training and equipment was American. Some of them began to think, "This was a very stupid thing that we did."

Q: Were you getting letters?

LIMBERT: I was. It's hard to know what you don't get, but I estimate, of the letters from my family or friends, I would get one out of twenty. And of the letters that I wrote, maybe one out of ten would get through. But that was something.

Q: You said that you could sort of read between the lines a bit of what got. Did you get any feel for the situation outside?

LIMBERT: A little bit. Again, the sense of concern, the sense of what was going on, but still you didn't really know the depth of what had happened, what was going on back here. The worst part of it, if you got a letter it might be from your family, it might be from some fourth grader in Illinois who was writing a letter as part of some class project. Now, that's all very nice but given a choice you'd much rather have the letter from your family but that displaces the letter from your family, it's not necessarily a good thing. Somebody wrote me, though, I forget, it was some kid wrote a letter, "I know how you must feel as a prisoner. After all, I'm in the second grade."

Q: Let's talk about the end game, then. How did that develop, from your perspective?

LIMBERT: Getting into the winter of 1980, November, December, I began to pick up bits and snatches that some kind of negotiation was going on and that was certainly a hopeful sign. Then we heard that the Swiss and the Algerians were involved, also a hopeful sign, serious people. Up until then, there had been a series of self-appointed mediators

Q: Like Ramsey Clark and Jesse Jackson and those type of people.

LIMBERT: And some French lawyer and an Argentinean. It wasn't quite clear what their agenda was but they weren't always serious people. The fact the Algerians were involved, the Swiss were involved, again, these were rumors, hints, things heard second and third, snatches of overhead conversation, overheard news broadcasts but at least it was reason for hope. Because until then the whole principle, the Iranian position is "We're not going to negotiate. There's nothing to negotiate about."

And at a certain point, because I suppose we had been useful for a period of time but were no longer useful, the war was more important to them, I guess they figured out it was time to get rid of us. You could sense that at the same time. Carter had lost the election, so if they had any particular grudges against Carter, which they did, that wasn't so relevant. The Shah had died. They had solidified their own political position inside Iran. So there was not much use to holding us anymore.

So we began to hear these things around Christmas of 1980. Really, we had what was probably one of the most hopeful signs, we had a visit from some Algerian delegation, who came around to see us, to talk to them.

Q: What were they saying?

LIMBERT: They were discreet, as you would expect. They simply said, "We are doing our best. We are pushing this. We consider this a duty as professionals." One was the, somebody was from their ministry in Algiers, the other was their ambassador in Teheran. But the good thing, as I said, these were serious people, looked like this was a serious effort.

Q: Did you realize that the tempo was building up or all of a sudden were you released? How did this work?

LIMBERT: Well, we knew, as I said, we had the Algerians come, so we knew something was going on. We also obviously knew that January 20th was an important date, because Jimmy Carter was leaving office, Ronald Reagan was taking over.

Q: By the way, did you have any feel for Ronald Reagan, at that point he had been around campaigning, obviously, and was considered very much a right wing figure. Did this concern you at all, one way or the other?

LIMBERT: I think it concerned the Iranians.

Q: Cowboy

LIMBERT: Exactly. So those were considerations but it wasn't until the night of the 19th of January, some of the students came in where I was and I was back with Col. Holland at that time. They said, "Come, we want to take you for a medical exam." My response was, "I don't want any medical exam. I'm fine." And they said, "No, you have to have a medical exam." I said, "I'm not playing your propaganda games, you wanna televise something." And they said, "No, no, we're going to, we're going to release you." I said, "Oh, well, that's different!" "And this is for the Algerians." "Well, that's certainly different. If it's for the Algerians, that's fine."

So we went to another area, they took us to another area and first we sat, we met with some, one of the Iranians said, "All right, we're going to release some of you." That's the way they put it, "We're going to release some of you. You're going for a medical exam and then you're going to talk to the television." The implication being, whatever you said to the television would determine whether you'd be released or not. So they took me to the Algerians, there was an Algerian medical team. That was when I saw Bruce Laingen for the first time. Wasn't sure where he was, wasn't sure he was okay. He looked good. Saw Vic Tomseth for the first time.

So then I was with the Algerians and I asked them, "What's going on?" They said, "You're leaving." I said, "All of us?" He said, "All of you."

So then we went to the television interview and basically they said, "What happened? Were you well treated?" and I said, "Look, I've been a teacher. Some students are good, some students are sort of in the middle and some students need an awful lot of encouragement." And I just left it at that.

Q: Had there been any attempt, prior to that, to sort of drag you in front of TV cameras?

LIMBERT: I can only speak for myself. I don't know about others. I have since, consequently, read about some things that were staged with others but there were, I had one or two television appearances. The oddest one was, they said, "There's a television crew here" and they dragged me in front and they said, "Tell us what you were doing at the embassy?" This was Iranian TV. So I said, "Well, you know, when the embassy was taken, around that time, I was busy correcting the draft of my PhD thesis, 'cause I was hoping to get it published. Let me tell you about my PhD thesis." And then I went into this long filibuster, this long explanation and I could see these guys' eyes glazing over. And they said, "Okay, that's enough."

The only other time, it was in April and it was shortly before the rescue mission, when we had a visit from representatives of the ICRC, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Swiss representatives came in. And then later in the day, with television crew, Ali Khomeini, now the Supreme Leader, at that time he was the Friday prayer leader of Teheran, came to visit us and television crews were with him. And I had to get a dig in. So he said, "Look, do you have any complaints?" And I said, "I have only one. I know you Iranians are very hospitable and I know that you never want your guests to leave, but this is ridiculous. This is too much. As much as I tell our friends here that it's time to leave" and the phrase in Persian is "it's time to lessen my intrusion upon you" "they won't believe me and they insist that we stay longer and prolong this particular soirï¿½e." And he kind of laughed. He thought that was funny, but my intention was very serious, which was to get the dig in that what was going on was in serious violation of Iran's own traditions and own norms and what is acceptable in Iranian society. I never saw the editorials but I am told I got very seriously attacked for that in the newspapers for making a joke about their culture. But that was about the limit of it. The idea of getting up and denouncing Carter, he said, "Well, of course, you would go home but it's the fault of the criminal Carter." I said, "Well, you can say that, if you want."

Q: Again, did you have a physical?

LIMBERT: Oh, yeah, they did your blood pressure and everything. The idea was that all of us were there and everyone was healthy, verify everyone. And then, that was about, maybe midnight, one in the morning. We got back to our place and we figured, "Okay, we're leaving any time." So through the night nothing happened. The next day, nothing happened. And we figured maybe something went wrong and we did hear snippets of radio about a deal and some financial arrangements and escrow accounts and all these things. And then about sundown, this would have been January, so sundown maybe was 6:30 or so

Q: On the 20th?

LIMBERT: On the 20th, we heard big guns going off, sounded like saluting rounds, as though they were saluting some kind of victory. And then they came in and said, "Pack up," we're leaving. And they threw us on buses. I think I ended up riding in the bathroom of some bus. I didn't mind. And they took us directly to the airport. I remember thinking it was very odd because Teheran traffic is notoriously awful but somebody much have cleared a space for us, 'cause we whisked right to the airport. There had been sort of false alarms, times before when our hopes had gotten up and so you always said, "Something could go wrong. This thing could fall apart." And it wasn't 'til you got to the airport and the doors opened, this wonderful cold air came in and you could hear the jet engines going. Maybe this is for real. They took our blindfolds off, because they obviously didn't want us in front of the full press of the world showing us blindfolded, took whatever stuff I had in my pockets and sort of threw us out of the bus and we had to walk across the tarmac maybe forty yards to the steps of an Air Algerie 727. And there were these guys, a lot of the guards standing there in their winter parkas yelling anti-American slogans and we had to walk past these guys.

And I kept thinking to myself, "This is really sad. What a group of losers. If they had any class at all" because they always insisted this was not personal and this was something political, they didn't have anything against us personally. So if they had any class at all they would have given us a flower, shaken hands and said, "We're sorry. This wasn't personal. This was something political" and sent us off, but they did it that way. It just left a very bad taste.

Q: I take it that you and your group just were pretty stone faced and just went through this.

LIMBERT: I think a few of the people might have yelled something at them. When I got there, when I got to the steps, there was somebody from Iranian TV who was there and he said, "What message do you have for the 'Hope of the Oppressed of the World'?" I said, "You guys, you had something pretty good going at the beginning and you really screwed it up. And what a shame!" That's all I said.

And the Swiss, I think it was the Swiss ambassador or the Swiss chargï¿½ d'affaires was there, sort of checking off people as we came in.

Q: Was there any concern about, this was the first time you were out, were the Iraqis launching air attacks on Teheran or had the "War of the Cities"

LIMBERT: The "War of the Cities," that came much later.

Q: That's when Scud missiles were being traded back and forth

LIMBERT: Right.

Q: including Baghdad and Teheran, but that hadn't started?

LIMBERT: No, that hadn't started. They weren't using Scud missiles. There had been some air raids on Teheran. I think the airport was blacked out and then they just turned on the runway lights very quickly and took off. A couple of Iranian F-4's escorted us.

Q: American planes.

LIMBERT: American-made planes, which the Iranians, by the way, I have understood subsequently, used very effectively during the war. There have been some studies about the Iranians' ability to use the F-4's and the F-14's that they had bought, without a supply of spare parts or training, used them very effectively, still, against the Iraqis.

Q: I take it it was really not until you got on the plane that you felt that you could freely talk and all?

LIMBERT: Oh, yeah, there was always something could have gone wrong. You knew that, so you just kind of kept your fingers crossed and hoped this all goes. Once we cleared Iranian airspace things got pretty good.

Q: This would be over Turkey?

LIMBERT: Over Turkey. We landed in Athens to refuel. The American ambassador in Greece had come to the airport. The Algerians wouldn't let him on, wouldn't let him near the plane because they said, "The deal is, you've been turned over to us until we get to Algiers and turn you over formally to the Americans we're responsible." So we just refueled in Athens. We got to Algiers about three in the morning. I think I still have some television footage from that time.

Q: Was it a matter of comparing experiences, on the plane?

LIMBERT: Sure. There were people there I had not seen for 14 months. There were a few people there I didn't even know. It was a motley group. There was talking about experiences, what had happened, what people knew, what they thought. Obviously, it was good to see friends again.

Q: Were any of the group, had they suffered more or had somewhat different experiences? How would you say?

LIMBERT: Well, it's hard for me to say. Obviously some of the intelligence people had a harder time, once the Iranians figured out who they were.

Q: What happened when you got to Algiers?

LIMBERT: Well, we got there. We met Ambassador Ulrich Haynes. The DCM was Chris Ross at the time. They were there. Warren Christopher was there. We all went into the airport lounge, had some coffee. The Algerian press was there. At that point, if I remember it, there was a formal handover. In other words, the way this worked, the Iranians had given us to the Algerians. The Algerians took us to Algiers and they then formally delivered us to the Americans. And there were two U.S. Air Force C-9 hospital planes on the ground. So we weren't in Algiers very long, maybe a couple of hours. One of my friends who watched film of this said the funniest thing was watching all the Foreign Service people in the airport lounge mingling. They said it must be in our blood.

Q: You might explain what "mingling" means.

LIMBERT: Mingling is what you do at a social event. You try to talk to different people, find out who people are, what they're doing. You just don't stand in a corner.

Q: Did the Algerians make any effort to talk to you or they just did their job?

LIMBERT: That was their attitude. We didn't have a lot of time or a lot of contact. I think up until the time we reached Algiers they were still in a sort of an intermediate phase, so they really were not going to be very effusive. Most Algerians are not very effusive people, anyway.

Q: No, my understanding they're rather dour.

LIMBERT: Reserved and very professional but very reserved. But that was good. The line they adopted was, "We have done our duty as professionals, in upholding international law and practice."

Q: Then what happened?

LIMBERT: So then, the Algerians released us to the Americans. We go to these wonderful air force plane and they give us these great parkas. First thing we get, these wonderful air force parkas, which is still one of my proudest possessions. And we leave Algiers at about three or four in the morning for Frankfurt. And we're just beginning to get a sense of how big this whole thing is, because as we're flying over France, through French airspace, the pilot announces that the French air controllers have sent us a greeting. And we land in Frankfurt, it's about six o'clock in the morning, this is, what, January 21st, now. It's cold, it's dark, there's snow coming down and we taxi up to some part of the terminal and I look out the window and there's this big crowd of people, all waving flags and yelling and I said, "That's interesting. I wonder who's coming? This must be some important figure coming." I did not connect it with us, at all.

Q: At that point you hadn't realized that this was, how long-running and important a story

LIMBERT: Didn't really, did not sink in. That was maybe the first inkling. So we got off, we got on buses. They took us to the hospital, the air force hospital at Wiesbaden. I don't think that exists anymore. A lot of those facilities have been shut down. Anyway, they took us to the air force hospital in Wiesbaden and they had a room with banks of telephones and basically you could call anywhere in the world from these telephones. Obviously I called my family, I called my wife and kids in Saudi Arabia, I called my family here in Washington and called my wife's family in California, just to talk, a couple of friends in the Department.

Q: And when you got off the plane, did the crowd sort of gather around, did you realize this was for you all?

LIMBERT: That's right.

Q: And did you get the feeling, when you got to Wiesbaden, that there were hard-eyed psychiatrists looking you over from the corner to see if you were

LIMBERT: They did some medical work. Actually, it was funny and at least in my case, that whole issue of the psychiatric, the psychology or the readjustment I thought was done very well. They told me, "You have an appointment to see the shrink. Go and see the psychiatrist." So I went in and there was a State Department psychiatrist and he looked at me and said, "You look okay. Go away." That was the best thing he could have done. We subsequently became friends and what he said was, "We just don't know that much about how people react to stress but we see a lot more resilience in people than we might expect. we assume people are going to react in a certain way but we really don't know." But I think that was probably the best thing he could have done.

There were some other briefings and questions and then the first night we were there, let's see, that was the 21st and that evening or afternoon was when Jimmy Carter showed up. Jimmy Carter came with Mondale and with Muskie, Secretary of State. I don't remember if Vance came with him or not. But I think what had happened was after the inauguration Carter had flown back to Georgia and then flew over to Wiesbaden to see us. It was a very emotional occasion.

Q: Did he say anything about the situation?

LIMBERT: He did. He either shook hands or hugged all of us and then we had a session for about an hour, hour and a half and he explained what happened, his reasoning. He took questions and really the only questions were, "Why did you admit the Shah?" and ab about the rescue mission.

Q: What did he say about the Shah?

LIMBERT: One, he came close to saying it was a bad mistake but talked about the various pressures that had built up - the political pressures, the diplomatic pressures.

Q: People like Rockefeller and Kissinger.

LIMBERT: He didn't say that.

Q: Yeah, but we know that now. It was coming from a good number of sources. Let's face it, we had been allied, whatever you want to call it, with the Shah and when he was in trouble, to turn him away was not very American, just the way keeping hostages was not very Iranian.

LIMBERT: No, there were all kinds of arguments. There was the argument, that, well, if we treat our friends this way (and he'd been an ally for twenty something years) if we treat him this way, what about Sadat, what about others when they get in trouble, what message did that send? There was a humanitarian issue. He needs this medical treatment. There were all kinds of issues like that. Carter himself, he didn't talk about this in this session but he, according to what we know, he was very hesitant to admit the Shah. All of his instincts, which were good, said, "This is a bad idea."

Q: What would you say was the mood of you all? Was it resentful, was it

LIMBERT: Against Carter? It's hard to say. I think there were a few who were very upset and I think one of the colleagues still talks about it. He said, "I couldn't bring myself to shake his hand, it was so difficult that I didn't know what I was going to do, whether to shake his hand or not." Many of us, however, felt that essentially he had sacrificed his presidency to keep us alive and that we were alive in large part because of him.

Q: Were the families, what happened, sort of reuniting and all that?

LIMBERT: They asked the families not to come to Germany. I had actually an Iranian colleague, somebody I had taught with in Shiraz, years before, who had had to flee Iran and he and his wife and son were living nearby and they called me up and they said, "Can you go out?" And I said, "Not only can I go out, I gotta get out of this place!" And there were reporters right outside the gate, there was this, there was that, so I set it up that they came in, I curled in the back seat of this car, they drove me out and we went to a department store in downtown Wiesbaden and had a wonderful time, just a nice meal together. But the families were not there.. We stayed in Wiesbaden about three days and then someone came and said, "Here's the plan, we're going to do this, we're going to do that." And we pointed out, "Look, hate to mention it but most of us, we don't have any clothes. We only have the clothes we came out in. We're pretty grubby. If we're going back home we should have some decent clothes." So they said, "Okay, at two o'clock in the morning, be downstairs in the lobby. We'll take you to the commissary. We'll give you four hundred dollars, five hundred dollars and a hour. And so you can buy, whatever you can buy at the PX" the BX, they called it, it was air force, the BX. So they said, "We'll take you to the BX, you've got an hour and a half, so buy all you can in an hour and a half." So they open the thing special for us, they take these buses over there and I'm wheeling this cart, buying a shirt, a cheap watch, some other stuff, a pair of pants and a jacket. The tailor is there, in two hours he's got them all altered. And then, I said, "I'm going to need a small suitcase to put this stuff in." So I buy this suitcase and as I'm looking at the suitcase somebody comes and takes a picture of me and he says, "Do I have permission to use this picture?" And I said, "Sure, no problem." The next say that picture's on the front page of the New York Times.

Q: I would think that, by three days, the sort of government process is hurry up and wait but I would imagine that all of you were chafing at the bit by this

LIMBERT: We were. Harry Barnes, the Director General at the time, was there to talk to the State Department about "your future," such as it was, in the State Department. I forget all of the sessions we had. A lot of it was just medical. There was an intelligence debrief, very short and the military had some of their own processing. I got a haircut, which I definitely needed and got the clothes. But that's right, three days was more than enough. And so they put us on Air Force Two, the vice president's jet and flew us across the Atlantic. We stopped in Shannon, Ireland for refueling and the prime minister of Ireland was there. And we got off the plane, went into the airport and he said, "I'm inviting you all in for Irish coffee." And that was good, because there was no alcohol on Air Force Two. So the Irish coffee tasted great. So then we flew to Stewart Field, which is near West Point, outside of Newburgh, New York and my wife and two children were there and they took us to the Thayer Hotel at West Point, if you're familiar with that and we stayed there for about I think about a day and a half. We had dinner with the corps of cadets, it was really very exciting. And there were, at that point there was a news conference.

And the other piece of this, I should tell you, again, this idea of how large this was. When we landed, and it's about maybe ten miles from the field to West Point. For 10 or 15 miles the whole route was lined with people. And my wife was sitting next to me and she said, "Wave to the people, they're expecting it!" I was just dizzy at this point.

Q: Just to give a feel, did you feel it hard, over a period of time, adjusting to being a father, a husband, sort of, back in the family again, something like this?

LIMBERT: I know that happens. My wife, she had to take both roles but she's extremely capable. She's always been the organized one in the family. So in terms of taking care of the children and managing a household, there wasn't a lot for me to do, anyway, coming back. We just had to figure out what we were going to do next and where we were going to live, what we were going to do, where we were going to put the kids in school, these kinds of things, because they had been living until I was released, they were living in Saudi Arabia. The kids had a good school, my wife was working there and so she was as uprooted as I was and we had to figure out how we were going to get our life back together.

Q: Well, to sort of continue this, then you came back and there was quite a reception in Washington.

LIMBERT: An amazing reception in Washington.

Q: I can't remember how this worked. You went where, to Washington, first?

LIMBERT: We flew from West Point to Washington, to Andrews and there we hooked up with the rest of the family, my father, my mother, my stepmother, my sisters, their husbands, nephews, nieces, were all there. And they put us on buses and we rode downtown, down to the White House and there was a reception at the White House and I still remember, our kids remember, the chocolate covered strawberries from that reception and the Marine Band and some nice pictures. That would have been, I think the 27th of January. They gave us some beautiful flags, we still have some pictures from that time.

And after that, they took us from there, they put us in the Crystal City Marriott for a day or two and basically after that we were back in civilian life. So one day you're at the White House, the next day you're out there waiting for the bus. That was a good thing. Tells you who you are.

Q: As you got back, were you either cautioned or briefed on how to deal with the media?

LIMBERT: Actually, they pretty much left us on our own and they said, "Look, we assume you're professionals. You know what to do." I think part of it was the change of administration, change of parties. The people associated with all these events were all gone. It was a new group

Q: You weren't really stepping on toes. If something were to happen, equivalent, in the middle of an administration, there'd be a bunch of people who'd be very sensitive about their role and all. This group said, "Well,

LIMBERT: "If you want to criticize the previous administration." Most people I think were pretty savvy about that. Again, people are professional and they gave us credit for that. There was a lot of media attention in those first months. People were always calling up about this or that. A number of the media tried to get me to make statements critical of Jimmy Carter. I wouldn't do it. People were interested in family things and they would call up say, "Well, how are you adjusting?" If there's a problem, I've yet to discover it, exactly.

Q: Did you feel that there were, some of your group that came out were extreme or were not professional or, how did you feel about this?

LIMBERT: That was really their business. People did what they did. I'm not going to judge what somebody else did.

What was interesting, one of the most interesting discussions we had was about three months later, we got together and had a talk from the psychiatrist who worked with the New York Police Department, specializing in victims of violence and the reaction of victims of violence. His message, which I thought was extremely sensible, was, "Look, do not judge yourself. You may have had expectations of how should have acted and maybe you were not as heroic as you thought you should have been. Do not set expectations for yourself which you cannot meet, because you will always be criticizing, and judging yourself." I thought that was very sensible.

Others, some people found that a little harder to take. But in terms of what others did, from my point of view that was their choice. Some people didn't talk to the press at all. Some people talked a lot. Some people said things that I wouldn't have said, but that was their point of view.

Q: I want to ask you about your mindset about Iran when you came back and did that change?

LIMBERT: Not really, not the country. The country, the civilization, it's so old, it's so glorious, it's survived much worse than this. Compared to what the country's gone through in the past, Khomeini and his folks are minor miscreants.

Q: Genghis Khan wasn't very nice. Tamerlane, that sort of thing.

LIMBERT: That's right. They've had a lot of very nasty people go through there. In that scale, these are real small timers.

Q: No pyramids of skulls.

LIMBERT: Exactly. For better or worse, Iran has been part of my life, connected, for more than forty years.

Q: Of course, with an Iranian wife, there it is!

LIMBERT: Well, that's right. You're at least somebody's husband, somebody's son in law, somebody's brother in law. So that connection is always there, but also as a student, as a teacher, in some way or another I can't get away from it.

No, my feeling for the country, for the people, really didn't change. In terms of the rulers or the regime, it was never any great shakes when the Shah was there. I think what probably bothered me more than anything else and maybe this is the Foreign Service Officer in me coming out, was that the people who were in authority at the time of the hostage taking and afterwards, simply refused to take their responsibility under centuries of international practice and refused to pick up on that responsibility, refused to take it seriously and never acknowledged even that they had that responsibility. That really has little to do with their being Iranian or anything else. I think it just is upsetting as a professional.

Q: People who'd been caught in hostage situations earlier on had a real problem in that when they got back to the Department people sort of unwittingly almost shunned them or something like that, like it might be catching. There has been a lot of change, or attempted change, in attitude. How did you find you were being treated and also were people, it was one of these things, "You must have had a rough time and now, what about them Redskins?" How did this work?

LIMBERT: I didn't mind that at all. There was a great desire to get back to normality. Whether it's the Redskins or something else, that was fine. I can relate a couple of incidents that still stick with me.

One was, we had been back for a while and the issue of an onward assignment came up. I had taken some time with my family and visited relatives and friends. Eventually, this was February, March, April, perhaps, after we had gotten out and I remember talking with someone in the personnel department about onward assignment and he said something that struck me as a little odd. He said, "In terms of assignments, you were really released at a bad time."

The other thing that happened was for a couple of months I took a kind of temporary, job helping out people in INR, Intelligence and Research, in the Near East South Asia section and when I went there they gave me a place to work, an office, which was fine except that it had no windows. And I finally went to the boss there and said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to be difficult but at this time an office without windows is probably not a good idea." When my wife heard about this she was outraged. She said, "How could they do something like that?" I said, "You have to understand. This is the State Department."

Q: We're talking about the spring of '81. What happened?

LIMBERT: Again, we tried to settle back into some kind of normal life and I don't remember the question ever coming up of whether I would stay in the service or not. That was simply a given.

Q: Just one thing, did you have any feelings towards the powers that be on the American side, from the president on down, including the State Department, putting you in that position?

LIMBERT: Not really. In terms of friends and colleagues that I knew, I knew that many of them had worked very hard on our behalf, manning task forces, working long hours, in a very difficult situation. As to Jimmy Carter, a lot of people have criticized him, that he should have done this or second guessed him. My view, two things: that he pretty much sacrificed his presidency for us and second, it would be a little bit ungrateful to criticize him since I'm here today, alive, probably, because of what he did.

The decision to admit the Shah, if there's any kind of bitterness or resentment about that, the underlying assumption of the decision was that we were expendable, we at the embassy and we were essentially hung out to dry. The people who pushed admitting the Shah, such as David Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger, I think that was unconscionable and what was more so is, I understand that some of those people have continued to deny that they were involved. They not only did it but they lied about it.

Q: Back to more mundane things, you're sort of "Okay, here I am, I need to go."

LIMBERT: I don't think we wanted to go overseas again. I had been overseas for eight years, not always in the best of circumstances but eight years. I joined the service in '73, June '73, left for my first assignment say about five months later. So we had not been in the States. The children were ten and twelve years old, so it was a good time to be in the States. Also, I had come into the service from academia, thought I had wanted to be an academic, I had gotten my doctoral degree. So one opportunity that came up was the opportunity to teach political science at the Naval Academy, or West Point.

Well we went over one day, it was in the spring, we drove over to Annapolis. It was one of those beautiful spring days of which perhaps we get three or four in this area. And we took one look at the campus and we were hooked. So that's where I went.

Q: You were there for how long?

LIMBERT: Three years.

Q: Let's talk about the Naval Academy. Had you served in the navy?

LIMBERT: No, I had not served in the military.

Q: There's the old saying, "There's the right way, the wrong way and the navy way." As you got into it, was there an acculturation problem?

LIMBERT: Not so much, because what I found and this should not be too surprising, is that there's a lot in common with the Foreign Service. The need to be away from the family some time, sometimes for an extended period. The rank in person system, the up or out system, the moving around, the kind of rootlessness, if you like, the emphasis on service. The navy talks about Duty, Honor, Country; we can certainly understand that. So there was a great deal in common.

Q: Interesting thing is that when they set up the Foreign Service after World War II, '46, the men who did it had been naval officers, they'd served in the navy. And you look at embassies and embassies are organized as you'd organize a battleship: captain, executive officer, various

LIMBERT: Department heads.

Q: It's a naval structure.

LIMBERT: Well, it's true. When you think about it, certainly the role of the chief of mission and the role of the ship's captain, there are a lot of similarities.

The cultures of the organizations are different. We don't salute, we don't wear uniforms. But we are a system of ranks, we do have a hierarchy and although we don't wear our ranks on our shoulders, people are very aware of them. The other piece of it is the role of the family, how important the family is. That part of it was actually quite familiar.

The Naval Academy is a bit of a hybrid. Although it's certainly a military institution, part of the Department of Defense, the faculty is, about half or even more, is civilian and my position was a little bit anomalous, in that I was half way, if you like, between the civilian faculty and the military faculty, because I was serving there for a defined period of time as an assignment, unlike the civilian faculty, which is a regular academic faculty, with tenure and academic ranks and sabbaticals and all those other things.

Q: You fit within, what, the School of International Affairs or

LIMBERT: Simply the Department of Political Science. It's an undergraduate institution. There's no graduate school there. So my job was to teach a number of sections of undergraduates.

Q: Where was the emphasis? How would you equate it to, say, a civilian college?

LIMBERT: Quite different. Having said that, many of the students had the choice of going to a very good civilian school, places like Cornell or Bowdoin or some of the Ivy League schools and chose the Naval Academy instead. So students are going to be students almost anywhere. But the school itself was different. It gives a B.S. degree. The curriculum is highly technical. You can major in political science. In those days you could major in political science or English or history, but if you did that you still took a very heavy load of engineering and science courses and math. There was a protocol there, if you like, that was called the 80/20 rule. That meant that no more than twenty per cent of the students could be majors in what was called "Group Three," that is history, English, political science or economics. Informally these were known as the "bull majors." Eighty per cent had to be either engineering, science or mathematics.

Q: My brother was Class of '40 at the Naval Academy and I lived in Annapolis for ten years as a teenager. I learned all the lingo and all that about the Naval Academy. I know, at least during my brother's time, they used to assign reading by the ruler.

LIMBERT: So many inches or lines? A couple of things had changed at the Naval Academy since your brother's time. One of them was the old lockstep curriculum, where everyone took the same curriculum and the only difference was the foreign language you chose. Everyone took a foreign language and that was the only elective that you had. That had gone out long before I arrived. The other was it had gone coed and when I got there in '81 it had not been coed for that long, five years or so. In fact, that was only two years after Jim Webb wrote his famous article in the Washingtonian.

Q: Jim Webb has just been elected senator from Virginia and it was pointed out in great detail that he had been Secretary of the Navy but he was a Naval Academy graduate and a marine officer and all and said something equivalent to "the only women who will go to the Naval Academy are 'horny women'." Really nice!

LIMBERT: Reading that article, okay, I'm sure he regrets he wrote that 27 years before but it is pretty harsh.

Q: What sort of things were you teaching in political science and how receptive did you find, how did they feel about this as being of value?

LIMBERT: I had very little problem with the students. These were not required courses, for one thing. These were elective courses or some of the courses, I taught Introduction to International Relations, I taught a course in Middle East politics and I taught a course in African politics. These were either full elective courses or, for the political science majors the international relations course was required. It was interesting for them. These were kinds of things that they hadn't thought about but it was clear I think to most of them that this would relate to their career.

I give you an example. I wanted to demonstrate the principle of sovereignty, what sovereignty meant, so I asked one of my international relations classes on the first day, "All right, here's the issue. Ten-fifteen years from now you're the commanding officer of a destroyer and you receive instructions to make a friendly port visit to Casablanca. What's the first thing you do?" They thought, "Well, we plot a course for Casablanca and you sail there." I said, "Well, you can do that but if you did that, if that's the first thing you do, your career in the navy will come to an inauspicious end, because you have just committed an act of war against one of the United States' oldest allies, the first country to recognize the flag of the United States during the Revolutionary War, because you have sailed a foreign warship into a harbor without the permission of that country." And they kind of looked and said, "Oh! Maybe there's something else we have to learn here." So then we talked about sovereignty and the need for clearances and permission from the country and so forth and what it meant to be on a warship and these kinds of issues. That they could relate to and they could see, "Okay, this is going to matter to me."

Q: The women midshipmen at that time, in class, were they out there slugging it out with the guys?

LIMBERT: Academically they were outstanding, but that should come as no surprise.

Q: Any woman who would enter the Naval Academy would be, obviously, a couple of cuts above anywhere else because of the problems.

LIMBERT: Well, that's what we're discovering at universities across the board, too. The issue for the women, first of all it wasn't easy and you could see that. I had a lot of respect for them because they were still not really accepted. They were sort of grudgingly accepted there, not just by their fellow students but the administration. There were a lot of good words, there were a lot of supportive words, but there was an undercurrent and Webb's article was hardly an undercurrent but it was symptomatic of larger ideas, that they had no place there.

The other problem they faced was that in career terms they were limited on what they could do. This has changed but at the time they couldn't be surface warfare officers, they could not be submariners, I don't even know if they could be aviators. There were a lot of limitations on where they could serve and basically they were still relegated to so-called support positions, kind of second rank positions, which a Naval Academy male graduate is not even eligible for these positions. They always go into what I guess the army calls the combat arms.

Q: Did you feel that you were breaking some crockery or did this ever come up?

LIMBERT: No, actually not. The institution was very good about that. No one ever said, "You can say this, you can't say that. You can deal with this or you can deal with that." There was none of that.

There was the larger issue and I must say there were many colleagues who agreed, this was not new, where do issues like studies of world cultures, studies of languages, knowledge of the world, where does that fit into the training, the education of a naval officer, or should it be electrical engineering, navigation, seamanship, weapons, calculus? Is that the direction? That was a tough battle, but it wasn't just my battle, it was a much larger battle within the Academy. I should say that battle continues.

Q: That's a problem. The navy and the air force has less contact with foreign cultures to a certain extent. They're not based often in a foreign culture, while particularly the army has to spend a lot of time dealing with

LIMBERT: It's more than that, I think. It's a question of what is the proper education for a naval officer. The sources of tension in those days and I think this continues, perhaps less, now, was because of the demand for nuclear power officers, to serve mostly on submarines, highly technical. That was Jimmy Carter's field. The nuclear navy always complained, said "We don't have enough volunteers choosing this career track" because of course every 18 year old kid wanted to fly jets.

Q: Coming out of these three years, how did you find this exposure? Did you get the right exposure to the military, to understand where the military was coming from, that played into your later career?

LIMBERT: It helped a lot. Again, this is one part of the military. This is the education part of the military and it's one service but in my next couple of postings I was in a position to be on the receiving end of a lot of the ship visits and eventually I started seeing my students on these visits. They understood a little bit of what the State Department was about, I understood a little bit of what they were about, what their education was about. I think it helped a lot.

Q: And I have to say that as of today I don't think any naval vessel has committed an act of war against Morocco.

LIMBERT: Maybe I can take credit for that. Or, if they have, it's been hushed up.

Q: Okay, let's move to, what, '84. Whither?

LIMBERT: That was payback time in the Foreign Service. These things happen. Actually, the assignment to the Academy was for two years and I was talking to a senior officer friend who came up to visit and he said, "Well, I'm offering you career advice. You shouldn't stay here very long because it won't do your career any good. But as a friend I'd say you'd be crazy to leave here, because it's so nice." But eventually it was payback time and one of those wonderful Foreign Service things where you go back into the system and start expressing views about where you'd like to go. And of course the first thing is they've never heard of you. "Oh, you're still here? Where have you been these last three years?" So once you kind of establish who you are and what you'd like to do, it's the typical thing: "What have you done for us lately?" Things move on and so eventually, as I would look at things that might be interesting there was always a reason why that wasn't available. It was promised to someone else or, no, that's not a real job or whatever it was.

So finally I said, "Look, one thing to keep in mind is I've never had a European language. I know Persian, I know Arabic but what about a European language?" Really, in those days, there was no provision for assigning a mid-grade officer to one of these posts via language training. You either had it or you didn't. You either got it as a junior officer or you came into the service with it.

But they said, "Okay, what about learning French?" I thought that sounds nice, I could end up in Lyon or Geneva or maybe Rabat or Tunis or Dakar, one of those places. So I said, "Okay, French." They said, "Okay, we have a nice position for you in Djibouti." But I couldn't say no. This is the service.

The only issue was our children, because there was no English language school for them. So I went to them and said, "Look, if we go, we take this assignment, it means probably you'll end up in boarding school." At the time my brother in law was living in Geneva with his family. So they said, "Well we could go to boarding school in Switzerland. There are a lot of boarding schools there, so it sounds like a pretty good deal to us. You go to Djibouti, we go to Switzerland."

So once they agreed to that, it was interesting, I had looked at some other assignments and looked at schools, I brought the school material home, the kids looked at it and said, "No, this does not look good." They were in the Ann Arundel county public schools at the time, which we found to be quite good. So they said, "No, this isn't worth it. This is probably not a good idea." So those places were off our list immediately.

Well, the boarding school thing worked out and actually I started my French while I was at the Naval Academy. I sat in a French class with a group of mids (midshipmen), to their great amusement and I started my French. Then once the academic year was over my wife and I spent the summer learning French at FSI. We drove from Annapolis to New Carrollton Metro station, we got on the Metro, rode to Rosslyn, did our French lessons, came back, listened to tapes of the dialogue on the Metro and did that for about nine weeks in the summertime.

Q: Then you're off to Djibouti? What were you doing in Djibouti?

LIMBERT: I was to be the political-military officer and deputy chief of mission.

Q: You were there from when to when?

LIMBERT: From '84 to '86.

Q: What was the situation in Djibouti at the time? And explain a little about Djibouti first.

LIMBERT: It's not a household word, is it? No, the Republic of Djibouti became independent in 1977. It had formerly been known as the TFAI, the Territoire Franï¿½ais des Afars et des Issas. Afar and Issa are two tribes. The Issas are Somali speakers. The Afars are mostly in Ethiopia, they have their own language. The Issas either live in northern Somalia or part of what is part of Ethiopia, centered around the town of Dire Dawa.

It was a French colony until 1977. It was originally set up as a coaling station for French ships on their way to Indochina.

Q: It was equivalent to Aden for the British.

LIMBERT: But a very small place, basically a desert. Population was probably somewhere around 150,000 to 250,000. The official languages were French and Arabic. The population was divided between Issas, Afars and about ten per cent people of Yemeni origin.

Q: What sort of government did they have, in theory and in actuality?

LIMBERT: It was the Republic of Djibouti, I still have my little flag. It was a one party state, with a president who was reelected from time to time with a large percentage of the vote. It was not a democracy to any extent. It was a quiet place, however and pleasant enough. The French were still there in large numbers, both military and civilian. There were a large number of what the French call coopï¿½rants, who are, they had different kinds. Some are like Peace Corps, some are young people doing their military service, doing Peace Corps kinds of work. But others are employees of the French government on assignment to, seconded to, various parts of Djibouti. So the man running the harbor, usually in all the ministries there were French coopï¿½rants. The Africans in general often said, "When we go to France they call us ï¿½migrï¿½s. When the French come here they call themselves coopï¿½rants."

Q: Who was your ambassador?

LIMBERT: I had two ambassadors there. The first year it was Al Adams, who went on to be ambassador in Haiti and Peru, I believe, after that. This was his first ambassadorship. And then the second year was John Ferriter, who had been DCM in Kinshasa before that, very much an Africanist.

Q: Other than flying the flag, why were we there and what were we up to?

LIMBERT: Good question. I suppose the main thing was to work with the French, to support the U.S. Navy. The U.S. Navy often called at Djibouti. Very often it was no more than what the navy called a "BSF," a brief stop for fuel, when the ship would pull in in the morning, fuel up, leave in the evening. Once in a while we'd get a longer visit of two or three days. It was also very important for the P-3's, these were the reconfigured, they started life as the Lockheed Electra, you remember those? A rather unfortunate name for an aircraft, which had an unfortunate history as a passenger aircraft. But they were reconfigured as antisubmarine platforms and they flew out of Diego Garcia. So we had negotiated landing rights for them at Djibouti. So part of it was to support the P-3's.

We were also a presence in a very tough neighborhood. Aden was nearby, and at that time we did not have relations with the so-called PDRY, the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen, which was a communist operation. Ethiopia was also Marxist at the time. This was the time of the great famine, drought and famine in Ethiopia. So Djibouti, though very poor and very limited in resources, was one of the places in the area which was relatively calm and stable.

Q: Somalia, what was happening there at the time?

LIMBERT: Siad Barre was still in power at the time. Things had not fallen apart yet in Somalia. Things were difficult in Somalia, but they always were.

Q: Was there any overlap, sort of northern Somalia claims on Djibouti and Djibouti's claims on Somalia and all this?

LIMBERT: The Somali flag has a star with five points, which is supposed to include what is today southern Somalia, northern Somalia or Somaliland, as it's called, Djibouti, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and northern Kenya. So there is sort of Somali irredentism, if you like and Djibouti was part of that.

Q: Well, northern Somalia had been British before everything changed. With Djibouti being French, were there ties or non-ties or did that cause any difference, compared to the rest of Somalia?

LIMBERT: Not really. There was an English-speaking cadre inside Somalia and you found a lot of Somalis who were quite well educated. We hired a number of them at our embassy, although a lot of the people from our embassy were ethnic Somalis who had fled from Ethiopia and, again, were quite well educated and spoke very good English. One of our local employees, his family name was Ogazz [spelled phonetically], Mohammed Ogazz. It turns out that there is a spiritual leader of the Issa people who's known as the Ogazz of Dire Dawa. This gentleman, I don't know if he was the son of the Ogazz but he was from a very distinguished family.

Q: Were we keeping a watching brief on Ethiopia from there or not? By this time, Eritrea was not independent.

LIMBERT: No, Ethiopia was in terrible shape at the time, but the war against Eritrea had been going on for decades at this point. There was the famine in Ethiopia. We had our embassy in Addis and it was interesting, for us to make these non-pro courier runs, where we took the pouch back and forth between Djibouti and Addis. For us, in Djibouti, that was a break, to get up to Addis, because of the nice climate and the altitude and so forth. For the people in Addis it was a break to get to Djibouti with more supermarkets and nicer restaurants.

Q: Well, what did you do?

LIMBERT: Well, we went fishing, we went camping, we hung out with the French. The main issues were also humanitarian assistance, such as it was, development assistance, such as it was, and political-military issues. We had a small military sales operation with Djibouti. We sold them some humvees. We had an IMET program. We sent Djiboutians to the States for various kinds of training. That was about it. The embassy was very small. It was maybe half a dozen American officers. That kept us busy.

Q: What was the French attitude? The French have always had a reputation of, it was their own hunting ground and they really didn't like others there, at least in West Africa. How about East Africa?

LIMBERT: It really wasn't the case. Relations with the French embassy sometimes could be difficult, but that depended on the personality of the ambassador, of the two ambassadors, if you like. Some were better than others. But most of the relations we had were with the French military and those were excellent.

Q: Was it mostly Foreign Legion, or not?

LIMBERT: There was a half brigade, the 13th Demibrigade, of the Foreign Legion there, but there were other French units there. The navy was there. What they call their troupes de marine, which is something like our marines but not exactly. There was a military assistance mission. So there were five or six different French units represented there and the nice thing was each one every year had its own ball, military ball and they tried to outdo each other. As the American either chargï¿½ or the number two usually we would get invited and these were always a lot of fun and we made good friends there, among the French. The French military, as a group, they were very welcoming and very helpful.

Q: Was there any concern at the time, of course you'd be particularly sensitive to this, radical Islam in the area?

LIMBERT: Not really. No, the Saudis were there. The Saudis were aid donors. But there wasn't much talk of radical Islam. The worry was perhaps more about Marxism, the communists, because you had the South Yemenis and the Ethiopians on the other side.

Q: Were the Ethiopians making noises or were they too busy with their own

LIMBERT: They were very busy, but the conventional wisdom was if the Ethiopians had wanted to take Djibouti they could have done so very quickly. The French had a commitment to defend Djibouti against outside attacks, but they admitted that with the forces they had there they were in no position to resist a determined Ethiopian invasion.

Q: How about Eritrea? It was part of Ethiopia but it was to say the least restive. Did that have any repercussions, Eritrean or resistance movements having their recreation

LIMBERT: No, there were refugee camps in the country. There were large numbers of Ethiopian refugees in the country. Most of them were kept in camps and conditions were not terribly good. The UNHCR was active there, to somewhat minimal effectiveness. But the Djiboutian government was very careful to keep correct relations with Addis Ababa, because Addis was really the big boy on the block.

Q: I would imagine the hand of the African bureau rested rather lightly on you there. I can't imagine that anybody was paying much attention to you.

LIMBERT: No, they had much larger fish to fry. I think our desk officer, her portfolio was 95 per cent Ethiopia and five per cent Djibouti. But I always liked that about the African bureau. The Africa bureau traditionally does not micromanage its posts.

Q: The kids, I take it, enjoyed the hard times in Geneva?

LIMBERT: They were in a school about a hour and half outside of Geneva, up in the mountains, in a ski resort town called Villars sur Ollon. You took the train to a place called Aigle right after Montreux and then you took a little post bus up the mountain. It was nicely arranged. It was a British system school, so they were used to this idea that parents would be posted in some distant place. They had two long holidays a year where they could come out to see us. There were parents' weekends every term, so that if we could get away we could go to there. You could fly to Paris pretty easily, take a train or a plane to Geneva.

Q: So you're back in the system now but you've also paid some dues, haven't you, by being in Djibouti?

LIMBERT: I would like to think so! Actually, I was back in the Department for some consultations in '85 or '86 and I ran into an A-100 classmates in the hall, and, as these things happen, you get to talking. He said, "We need somebody to go to Algeria. Are you interested?" I said, "Let me think, let me check at home and I'll let you know." They said, "We want somebody to be head of the political section there." So I had a special curiosity about Algeria, since they were so instrumental in getting us out of Teheran.

Q: So you got that?

LIMBERT: So I put in for it and that was my next assignment.

Q: You were there from when to when?

LIMBERT: From '86 to '88 we were in Algiers and the good thing was that our children could continue at the same boarding school and we were an hour and a half flight from Algiers to Geneva.

Q: This is '86 'til '88, what was the situation in Algeria when you got there?

LIMBERT: It was still a one party state. Chadli Bendjedid was the president. The FLN, the National Liberation Front, which had been the ruling party since independence in '62, was still in power. You could see the end of this coming. The economy was not in good shape. People talked endlessly about shortages of consumer goods, what was available, what wasn't available, what you could find. There were open markets, there were free markets with a good variety of fruits and vegetables and meat and fish but the cost was very high, particularly if you calculated at the official exchange rate. I remember meat, a kilo of beef being somewhere in the region of 10 to 15 dollars for a kilo at the official exchange rate, which nobody but the American embassy actually observed. So the economy, the employment system, the distribution system was not very good, but it was, in terms of security there were no problems.

Q: The Islamic fundamentalist nastiness

LIMBERT: It had not started. What none of us could figure out at the embassy was why it had not started, because sort of all of the classic causes for it were there. You had a sclerotic political system, you had this nomenklatura from the FLN which had taken all the privileges, all the nice houses, all the positions and basically left nothing for anybody else.

For most Algerians life was very hard. Housing was very difficult. Employment was very difficult. Schooling was very difficult. Everything about life there was difficult, unless you were in this ruling nomenklatura, in which case you had access to things that most people didn't have. The inequalities of income, the inequalities of life were blatant.

So all of the factors that you would have thought would lead to some Islamist movement were there and the thing that we kept asking ourselves within the embassy was why hasn't it happened?

Q: Were you also noticing sectional differences there or tribal differences or were there any of these things that were going on?

LIMBERT: You heard things. There was a Berber population, maybe 15 per cent of the country was Berber speaking and the area is actually very close to Algiers. The Friday drive to Kabylie, which is a beautiful mountainous region coming back from the coast, we'd just drive up there, have lunch and come back and talk to the people there and they would insist that they were not Arabs, they were very proud of not being Arabs.

Q: Recently, Kabylie, at least it's my understanding there have been demonstrations

LIMBERT: There have been problems there. A lot of this, at the time we were there, it was still covered up.

Q: Again, I refer back to your recent experience. You must have been sort of making a certain personal monitoring of the Islamic unrest of the country, or not?

LIMBERT: What you could see was visible signs of piety and religious feeling in what was officially a socialist state. Mosques were going up everywhere. There was money going into mosques. But the nature of an underground movement is that it's underground and frankly we didn't know that much about it.

Q: Were women becoming more veiled or covered, or not?

LIMBERT: No, you didn't see so much of that. You saw some, but not a great deal. Not more or less than you would expect would exist.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Algerians?

LIMBERT: The Algerians, I would call them proud and reserved. They have a great deal of pride. They are unlike most other Arabs, in that they are not particularly outgoing.

Q: I was interviewing a man just the other day who was the officer in Oran. His story was you could tell a Moroccan from an Algerian by, the one that was smiling was a Moroccan.

LIMBERT: Well, that's a stereotype. The bureaucracy was Soviet style apparatchiks, very formal, repeating of formulas, but they were professional. At their best, they did their homework. When you dealt with an Algerian officially, you had better do your homework, you had better be prepared, because they know their stuff and they were good. They followed the French model of training an elite to run their civil service and their foreign service and the people I dealt with in the ministries often were excellent, very well qualified. But they also had on top of this layer of French style training was a kind of Soviet style stonewalling: never say anything, never agree to anything, never give in, never admit that the other side might have a point, repeat the formulas. There was that.

There were restrictions on Algerians associating with foreigners. That was hard to break through. We didn't have a lot of Algerian friends. We had some, we knew some Algerians. Like anyone else, when you get to know them they're very nice people. But it wasn't easy. It's a hard place to serve.

I have a lot of respect for the Algerians, what they had been through and what they had done, but warm and friendly, like you think of Egyptians or Lebanese or Syrians, they were not.

Q: Looking at Algeria, granted the French have put a lot of investment in there, but the Algerians were left with a pretty viable place and this socialism cum Sovietism really destroyed the damned place, didn't it, or not?

LIMBERT: It did. Of course they had oil money, which smoothed things out a little bit. They could at least survive on their oil money. But in terms of the role of the French, one thing the French never did was think of eventual independence. Algeria was part of France, Algeria was not a colony, so it was French people ran everything. You mentioned Oran. The story in Oran was that even the garbage men were French, the postmen were French, down to the minor functionnaires. When the French left, essentially everything went. The education system was entirely in French, so you had a whole class of educated people who were illiterate in Arabic.

Q: I interviewed Dick Parker, he was ambassador there, Boumediï¿½ne, I think, made the comment, Parker was talking with Boumediï¿½ne and some of the cabinet and Boumediï¿½ne said, "How come this American speaks better Arabic than you all do?"

LIMBERT: The poor Algerians are the butt of jokes because their dialect is so strange, on the one hand and not many of them speak standard Arabic.

I found it interesting. Difficult place to work. As a political officer, I found it very hard. Access was very limited. Information was very limited.

Q: Was it sort of Kremlinology or were things so static that you didn't even have that?

LIMBERT: No, you had that. Who's in, who's out? What's the politburo doing? What's the central committee doing? What does this communiquï¿½ mean, try to parse a communiquï¿½. For someone in our profession it's frustrating, 'cause you don't really have a good sense of what the society is about.

Q: Was there much Soviet influence there or not?

LIMBERT: The Soviets were there. A big Russian embassy was there. But in terms of what they did, I just don't know. I think their military training was heavily Soviet. As I said, a lot of their bureaucratic practices were Soviet. When I first got there, the head of the North American division of the foreign ministry was this guy right out of the Soviet bureaucracy, he was just such an apparatchik, down to his lousy suits and he was just very difficult to deal with. After I'd been there a year he told me, "I'm being transferred." I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "To Moscow." And we all laughed, because he'd feel right at home there.

Q: Who was your ambassador, or ambassadors, while you were there?

LIMBERT: One ambassador, Craig Johnstone.

Q: How did he operate?

LIMBERT: Very well. He was young, very energetic. He liked to fly paraplanes, which we all just kind of shook our heads at, because we thought this was somewhat suicidal on his part, a glorified kite with a small motor but he flew these things. One of the smartest people I ever dealt with in the Foreign Service. He pushed the Algerians hard on a lot of issues.

Q: What were our interests there?

LIMBERT: Libya, economic, commercial sales. Algeria was potentially a very rich country. Agricultural sales, Arab League issues, Islamic issues, Middle Eastern issues, the Western Sahara. The Algerians kind of involved themselves in everything. African issues as well.

Just as they had been very effective as mediators between us and the Iranians earlier, they were involved as mediators between the Iranians and the Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq War. In fact, they lost their foreign minister and his delegation was in a plane that was shot down somewhere in the Iran-Iraq border region.

Q: What about Libya? I take it Qadhafi wouldn't mess with the Algerians, would he?

LIMBERT: No, but this was right after, '86, I think, when we had bombed Tripoli.

Q: Let's talk about Moroccan relations.

LIMBERT: When I first went there in '86 there were no relations. There was an interest section, Moroccan section, which I think was under the Tunisian flag. The big issue between the two was the Western Sahara, which the Algerians adamantly denied they had anything to do with or any role in. But also Algiers and Algeria was the headquarters for the Polisario and the Sahrawi Front. But relations were chilly. There was very little traffic across the border.

And then, at the very end of my tour, there was reconciliation. There was a meeting at the border which our foreign ministry contacts told us was an absolute failure and was the dialogue of the deaf and then, lo and behold, the next day it was loudly announced that relations were going to be restored and that the King of Morocco, affectionately referred to as "Leroy" in those days would be visiting Algeria. And, lo and behold, several days later the royal yacht sailed into Algiers harbor and their were fireworks and salutes and the interest section became an embassy and it looked like there was real movement. I left Algeria shortly after, but I understand things did not go well on that front.

Q: What was our thinking at the time, the Polisario movement, what was in it for the Algerians? Were they trying to keep the Moroccans off balance, were they committed because of ideology? What was there?

LIMBERT: It was a little hard to figure, actually. There were different explanations. One, which seemed a little far fetched, but who knows, was that the Algerians were looking for access to the Atlantic. The other was simply, a more classic explanation, which is what is good for the Moroccans can't be good for us, so we have to be against it. Also, the fact that the original division of the Sahara, it was sliced up between Mauritania and Morocco and Algeria perhaps felt cut out. That was back in '74 or '75 and the Algerians were unhappy about that. They made it a matter of principle, of course. When you spoke to them it was self-determination.

It was unfortunate because it turned into a kind of test of machismo between the two countries and became almost a center of diplomatic rivalries, a matter of who could attract the most supporters, other countries, to its cause and became kind of a litmus test of relations. You had to almost choose sides.

One of my jobs as the 0-2 level political chief there was to stay in contact with the Polisario. The Polisario had a mission. The head of mission used to come over now and then. I did make a trip down to the refugee camps in Tindouf, in Algerian territory. So we did speak to the Polisario, we were open to the Polisario and it was actually a very sad situation, because these were people who had basically spent decades in camps and there was no apparent movement on either side.

People accused our embassy in Rabat of clientitis. What can I say? At our level it wasn't an issue. But our relations with Morocco were certainly good and the question was, were we willing to support their claims to Western Sahara? Officially we were not. Officially, we presumably took no position on it. But at the level of the embassy, I suppose there was support for the Moroccan position.

Q: Well, Morocco has always been the subject of a certain amount of giggles in corridors of the Department of State regarding political appointees who go there, our political ambassadors getting recruited by King Hassan.

LIMBERT: Becoming more royalist than the king.

Q: Writing cables, "our king." This is sort of the general feeling. Another ambassador was PNGed from Morocco because he knew too much.

LIMBERT: I think he may have been one of the last career ambassadors to serve there. We've rarely had a career ambassador there. The interesting part of all this, at least under the previous king, part of this conventional wisdom was we would send these political appointees, they would become big boosters of the king and they would get nothing in return. So, for example, when Morocco and Algeria did their reconciliation in 1988, apparently the American embassy in Rabat was caught as flatfooted as everyone else.

Q: Did you ever have it presented to you, "We got you out of prison?" Did the Algerians ever say that to you personally?

LIMBERT: No. That's not the Algerian style. One of the things I admired about them was their professionalism. They went at the work of diplomacy very, very professionally and I found that admirable. That was never mentioned. If it came up, it was a question of "this was our duty, to uphold the system of international agreements and international procedure."

One interesting part of it was that the people who had done the mediation, many of them, were associated with the former foreign minister, Ben Yahia, whose plane was shot down at the border region between Iran and Iraq while he was on a mediation mission. There had been was a power shift within the government and a lot of those people close to Ben Yahia were on the outs. So when I got there in '86 I asked people about an official who had been quite prominent at the time and discovered basically he was a non-person. I got blank looks. No one claimed that they had ever heard of him. I finally found him, because it turned out he was living in the same apartment building as one of our communicators and as I was visiting the communicator I saw his name on the door. But no one in the government would lift a finger to put me in contact with this man.

Q: What about relations with Tunisia?

LIMBERT: I didn't see anything special in that relationship. That seemed to go on its own. The feature of these kinds of relations and you see this around in the Arab world, is that many of these countries really don't see each other as foreign countries. It's not that they own each other but they're so closely related in culture and language and history that sort of the normal niceties of relations between states simply don't apply.

Q: What about a country like Egypt? Was this a big player in that world or not?

LIMBERT: It seemed to me there's always a rivalry, because Algeria saw itself as a big player in a lot of arenas: the non-aligned, the African group, the Arab League, the Islamic Conference. So you had a certain amount of pushing and shoving with others who were similarly involved and Egypt was one. The relations were certainly correct and they were not bad but the Algerians did play a role and when they decided to get involved in a problem they did their homework and they worked very professionally at it.

Q: I guess Algeria had its own money, so did Saudi Arabia play any role?

LIMBERT: I didn't see a large role there, no. I do think that King Fahd did make a visit there at the time. But Algeria, as you said, had its own oil money. How wisely they used it, that was an open question. They had seen that Saudi and Gulf money had gone into both Tunisia and Morocco, particularly in areas like tourism. Now that you ask the question, the Saudis had put, the Saudis and the Gulf Arabs, also, had put money into projects in both Tunisia and Morocco. It was investment, it was commercial, but particularly in the area of tourism. As I recall, there was talk with the Algerians about doing something similar. I don't remember if it was tourism or other kinds of development projects, but it was bringing money from the Gulf. I'm not sure if anything came of it.

Q: Was Algeria into tourism?

LIMBERT: It was starting. Nowhere near what Tunisia and Morocco were doing.

Q: I have a hard time thinking, I hear Algerians are a rather dour people.

LIMBERT: Algerians?

Q: And all of a sudden having topless Parisians on the beach.

LIMBERT: I don't think that was the tourism that they were looking for. In terms of natural beauty, the ruins, the wall paintings, the drawings down in the south, the Sahara tourism. There was some of that. In the coastal region, the Roman ruins are spectacular. It was untouched. If you visited a site like the Roman garrison cities that had existed there, you would be the only person there over five or six square miles of territory, amazing places.

I'll tell you an interesting story. When we were there my sister and her husband came to visit and they rented a car and drove on their own around the country. They got to a police checkpoint and the police were very courteous and asked what they were doing. They said, "We're tourists." And one of the policemen said, "Oh, tourists! We've heard about them but have never met one until now."

The problem with tourism, again, the hotels were pretty bad in most places, the restaurants were pretty bad, service was pretty bad. The currency was wildly out of line. If you exchanged at the official rate costs were very high. So it was not well set up for tourism. That being said, if you came and were willing to put up with these things, like the hotel with no water, the restaurant with kind of questionable service and food, the rewards were there.

Q: Did Algeria turn its back on, I'm not even sure it was in existence, but the Islamic movement in the Arab world?

LIMBERT: The ideology at the time was socialist and Arab nationalism, very much a part of the nonaligned movement. It was an Islamic country. You could see a lot of money being spent to build mosques, quite elaborate ones. This was private money. There was money sloshing around in the country and a lot of people were building mosques in the small towns and the villages but officially the ideology was socialist and Arab nationalist.

Q: Was socialism beginning to get decrepit, particularly since they embraced the Soviet model and the Soviets were about to go down the tubes?

LIMBERT: Nobody quite knew it at the time. Well, what really discredited it was the hypocrisy of it. What you was the nomenklatura, which was the high officials of the ruling party and the military who lived quite nicely, had taken over the nice villas from the French era and had cars and nice places to live and good clothes and access to foreign goods and foreign exchange and travel. These were the avowed socialists. For the rest of the people there was very little. Even if you earned a decent salary there was very little to spend it on.

Private enterprise existed, but it existed in a kind of never-never land. For example, our son was visiting once and he broke a string on his tennis racquet, so he needed to get it restrung. So I asked someone where you can get a tennis racquet restrung. He said, "Go to a flower kiosk" in this certain neighborhood. Algiers had flower kiosks everywhere. So I went there and I said, "I understand you can restring tennis racquets?" He said, "Yes, I was one of Algeria's outstanding tennis players at a time, but I couldn't make a living at it so I run this flower kiosk and do this on the side." Then he asked, "Do you have strings?" I said no. He said, "If you need strings, there's a bakery over there and the guy in there has strings for tennis racquets."

But that was the way the whole place operated. I needed a small spare part for a foreign car that I had, a European car. All over Algiers were these little shops that advertised "spare parts for cars." So I went into one of them and I said, "Do you have whatever part was wanted?" He looked at me like "Who's this idiot that expects us to have spare parts?" There was no relationship between what was supposed to be and what there was.

The whole place operated that way. There were a couple of very nice restaurants, but they were behind closed doors. There was never any sign or any publicity, 'cause they wanted to operate far from the scrutiny of the authorities. That was the only way they could operate.

And as far as most people, there was a real disaffection not only from the so-called socialist system, whose failures were obvious, but of the whole history. All of the monuments to the great liberation struggle and the war of independence were pretty much ignored by most people, who saw them as irrelevant to their situation and also as being kind of a glorification of the old guard, whose time, in their view, had passed.

Q: Were we making anything like ship visits or anything like that to try to open up things?

LIMBERT: No, we didn't do any ship visits when we were there. We had a defense attachï¿½ and we had an office of military cooperation and they were looking at purchases. I believe they had bought or were buying C-130 transport planes, the workhorse of every air force in the world. They were looking at a program called "Spares for Bears," where we would supply spares for Soviet equipment. I don't know where the stuff came from but we had it and we were willing to supply it. But the attachï¿½s were very circumscribed in what they could do and military-military relations were growing but they were still pretty limited.

Q: Did the Spanish play any role in that era?

LIMBERT: Geographically, they should. Oran and the western part of Algeria is geographically much closer to Spain and actually the pied noirs, the French colonials, were mostly people of Spanish origin. Oran still had a bullring. They didn't use it, but it was there.

Of course, the big Spanish influence was through the Spanish Muslims, the Andalusians, who were expelled from Spain after 1492 and I believe many of them ended up in western Algeria. The town of Tlemcen was their center and the music, the Algerian music, the so-called malouf, is Andalusian music.

Q: Italy, is there any

LIMBERT: Didn't see much, unlike Tunisia, which had this wondrous little community of Italians. Claudia Cardinale comes from that community.

Q: '88, you moved. Where?

LIMBERT: Went to Dubai. This was an assignment that had been cooking for a long time. This is one of those things you talk about, an assignment that I worked hard to get, because in 1975 and '76 I had opened an office in Dubai, what that time was simply a branch office. It was not a consulate but a branch office, to do economic and commercial work. Since then it had grown into a consulate general, had relocated from our original very modest offices. Now I had the chance to go back there. It was an O-1 position. They were looking for somebody who also knew Persian, because Dubai was, at the time, Iran's shopping mall and it was also a window into Iran, and a place where many Iranians applied for visas to the United States. Persian is one of the four languages in Dubai, along with Arabic, English and Urdu, so it's also very useful there. So it seemed to me like a logical bid. Of course convincing the Department was something else, as it always is. Something about a square peg in a square hole just gives the Department fits.

Q: You were in Dubai from when to when?

LIMBERT: I was there from '88 to '91.

Q: And it was part of the

LIMBERT: United Arab Emirates.

Q: The "Trucial States." Part of my consular district, when I was in Dhahran.

LIMBERT: There was a wonderful tradition of people like you, Phil Griffin and others who would make these periodic visits and do some wonderful reporting out of these places.

Q: Anyway, what was the situation in the Persian Gulf?

LIMBERT: At that time? I served under two ambassadors there. One was David Mack, who was there my first two years and he was replaced by Ned Walker; both career people, both Middle East specialists, both Arabic speakers. Really, you'd have to divide the assignment into two parts: pre-August of 1990, that is pre-Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and post.

U.S.-UAE relations, they were pretty much what they had been since the UAE's independence, that is, the U.S. was not the primary player for the UAE. The primary player had been Britain and still was. Now Britain did not have, obviously, the military-political clout there that it once did but its presence in a commercial sense, economic sense and a cultural sense was still quite large. The joke was that at independence the British went out the front door, walked around the house and came in the back, in much larger numbers. Our relationship was like that two neighbors. We said hello, we got along, the relations were correct, but they were not overfriendly.

That worked for both sides. The U.S. was not really anxious to get too deeply involved in the UAE. For one thing, if we had, one thing the UAE wanted from us was help to get back the islands that the Iranians took from them in 1971. While we didn't have any great affection for the Iranians in 1988, that was not an issue we wanted to get involved in.

The other was our position vis-ï¿½-vis the Middle East and Israel, which, at least for the central government of the UAE and for Sheik Zayed, was a limitation on how close we could get. The week before Saddam's invasion of Kuwait Sheik Zayed had gone on television and given an interview and said, "Israel is our enemy number one but the U.S., as Israel's supporter, is our enemy number two." That was conveniently forgotten about, by both sides, later on. There was a heavy Palestinian presence in the UAE, particularly in the media, so the tone of the media was very pro-Palestinian and not always very friendly to us. So on the development of strictly government-to-government relations there were limits.

There was a strong commercial presence there. Young people from the UAE had discovered the joys of education in the United States. People were discovering the joys of vacations to the United States, buying property in the United States or getting medical treatment in the United States. On a person-to-person level, relations were developing, were getting much stronger. In the Seventies there were very few people from that area who'd actually been to the United States. That travel got much more common. As I said, commercial relations were stronger. So on a personal level, relations were strong, but on a government-to-government they were a little reserved. All that changed very quickly after August 1990.

Q: Pre-August 1990, where did Dubai fit into the UAE? What sort of government did Dubai have and was it any different from the other ones?

LIMBERT: That was always a question we asked ourselves. Is this a federation? Is this a confederation? What is it?

It was not a unitary state. Under the system that existed the ruler of Abu Dhabi was the head of state. He was translated as "president" but president implies a republic. The word for president in Arabic is "chief of the republic" but there was no republic, so he was simply known as chief of state.

The ruler of Dubai was the federal vice president and then the ministries were divided up among the various seven emirates, with Abu Dhabi and Dubai getting the lion's share.

Q: What did Sharjah get?

LIMBERT: Sharjah was number three. Then you had the small ones: Ras al-Khaimah, Fujairah, Umm al-Quwain and Ajman, getting smaller pieces of the pie. Integration had moved slowly. The police forces in 1988 were not integrated. You still saw the red and white flag of Dubai flying alongside the federal flag at a lot of places. Facilities like the airport and the port in Dubai, the major infrastructure facilities, were run locally. The Dubai municipality was of great importance. It managed a lot of the city planning and the infrastructure for the city. The Dubai electricity company ran independent of the federal system. And the reason for this, I think, goes back to the early days of the country when, frankly, Dubai just ran better. It was better organized because of the mentality of the ruler, Sheik Rashid, who took a very personal, hands-on, immediate interest in what happened in his city-state and didn't really worry that much about larger international issues. He very much saw himself as a businessman and his vision for Dubai was as a commercial center open to anyone who was willing to come there and work, invest and do business.

Q: Did you have sort of a feckless group of young men with money wandering around or was it pretty much business oriented?

LIMBERT: Where?

Q: In Dubai.

LIMBERT: No, not at all. There were the great merchant families, maybe eight or ten, some of Arab origin, some of Iranian origin, who enjoyed good relations with the ruler. They had hotels, they had factories, they had shipping companies, they owned travel agencies and they were pretty serious people.

Q: Let's talk about your work. What about visas for Iranians and all? What was our policy and what were we doing?

LIMBERT: We really did not have what I would call a policy. Dubai was a place that Iranians could come and get visas and when I got there, I saw the visa situation was not good. There were abuses on both sides of it. On the one side, individual Iranians coming there were not treated very well or very courteously. I said, "As a professional, that's simply not acceptable. Someone coming in to apply for a visa deserves courteous, professional treatment even if we can't always give them the visa

Q: Was this on the part of the Foreign Service Nationals or more the officers?

LIMBERT: It was actually sometimes more of our inexperienced American officers. Of course the Foreign Service Nationals picked that up but no, that was not it.

The other was that somehow, over a period of years, a clique of Iranians in town had gained access to Americans at the consulate. They had become friends, they had developed social relationships, they invited them here and there, they gave them gifts, whatever it was. That, then, put them in positions, I won't say officially, but unofficially, as visa brokers. They used that position to introduce people they knew and friends to the consulate in the hope of getting visas.

Both of those things we had to put a stop to. And in those days we could ensure that people were treated correctly, courteously. We created written material in Persian. We made sure that congressional inquiries were answered promptly. Basically, we had to to clean up a consular operation with the special part of it that involved Iran.

Part of the fun of being there was that from time to time I would help out our colleagues on the line. It was a chance to use my Persian. So I went out and interviewed people. I found that I was talking to people who that morning had been in Mashhad or Shiraz or Teheran or Tabriz and I was just curious about what was going on in those places. What are people thinking about? What's the atmosphere like? One time I had a person from Shiraz come in. She was a teacher, and I said, "Oh, is Mrs. So-and-so still the principal of this high school over there?" And she looked at me and I could just see her thinking "This is the craziest thing I've ever heard. The Americans know everything, down to who is the fifth grade teacher or the tenth grade math teacher in Shiraz."

What we discovered was if you were willing to talk to people and listen to them you got a picture of what life was like in Iran. Not an insiders' political view, not what the president was thinking or what the Supreme Leader was thinking or what this was thinking or what that was thinking but what life was like for 95 per cent of the population, and how they were coping with the Islamic Republic.

Q: You'd been around the block a long time. What was your impression from this about how well the Islamic overlay was fitting the people you'd be seeing?

LIMBERT: Well, part of it was they would also tell you what they thought you wanted to hear, which to curse the mullahs and the regime, which may have been sincere on their part but so what. My wife was also working there, because she's a Persian speaker she was helping us. We didn't have enough Persian speakers. She was helping us with the consular interviews. Both of us got the impression that the Iranians we were talking to were doing what Iranians have done for centuries, which was doing their best to cope with a bad situation. This was a situation over which they had no control. No one had asked them what they wanted. So how did they adjust? As many of them told me, they said, "Look, when they tell us to go out and march and yell 'Death to Israel' or 'Death to this' or 'Death to that' we do it, because that's what you have to do."

One encounter that still sticks in my mind was a woman about in her thirties, 34 or 35 years old, obviously well educated, obviously well spoken and she was a social worker. As I recall she was married, had a couple of children. Either her good luck or her bad luck was that I interviewed her for a visa and I asked her the standard question, "Why do you want to go to the United States?" She looked me and sighed and said, "Sir, can you begin to imagine what it's like to live as a woman in an Islamic Republic? I just need a break. I've got to breathe." This was a period, in the late Eighties, early Nineties, when in fact there was a tremendous amount of pressure on people to conform to the public morality strictures. There was a lot of harassment of people. There was a lot of class resentments that were still being worked out and the Islamic Republic had given power to a class of people who had been denied power for many years under the Shah and by God they were going to get their own back. So if they didn't like the way you were dressed or the way you looked or the way you wore your shoes or the way you wore your hair, by God they weren't going to stand for it. That eased up later, but at the time there was a lot of pressure on people. So this woman told me, "Look, we are constantly under pressure. We simply are never free of the fear of being stopped, harassed, imprisoned, beaten, whatever, either us or our friends and I have to get out for a while and get a break." Needless to say, I did give her the visa. After that, I couldn't deny. This was part of the atmosphere.

The other thing that you saw which was very interesting was older people whose family life, whose social network, had been torn apart. Iranians historically were not people who emigrated in great numbers as a people, unlike Lebanese or unlike Greeks. They pretty much put up with conditions as they were. In ones and twos might leave, but large numbers never did. The revolution had changed that. There had been an exodus, largely of educated younger people, either fleeing the war, fleeing the social restrictions, looking for a better life for themselves and their children. Those left behind were their parents and we saw the parents coming for visas. They had looked forward to an old age surrounded by lots of children and grandchildren, close families. That wasn't happening. The children were now in Minnesota and California and North Carolina. The grandchildren barely spoke any Persian. Many of the young men had married Americans. This was very distressing and disturbing. They were far from their children. They were far from their grandchildren. The children had been uprooted, and their whole social fabric had been ripped apart.

Q: Still on the consular side, did you run into any protection and welfare problems?

LIMBERT: Americans, you mean? Oh, yes. There's always the American who, when he packs his bag to go overseas, forgets to bring his brain along. So, of course.

Q: Having been a consular officer in Saudi Arabia, automobile accidents, they threw everybody involved in an automobile accident into jail. One you got into the jail system

LIMBERT: I think it was better in the Emirates. Things worked there. I'm glad I was not a consular officer in Saudi Arabia. But occasionally somebody would get himself in trouble. As the consul general I didn't have to get involved in these things directly, but I wanted to make sure that we provided the right services for people. In general, the way the system worked was that the companies there, the so-called sponsor, because any foreigner who lived in the Emirates, had to be sponsored by somebody. We wanted to be sure that the sponsors, in the first instance, took care of their own employees.

But we had our consular responsibilities. Our relations with the local police were excellent. We had a wonderful regional security officer who developed a good relationship with the local police, so we had good relations there. This paid off big time after August of 1990, when the numbers of U.S. servicemen and women visiting went up twenty times. The relations with the local hospitals were good. It was not a big problem. We occasionally got consular issues, but it wasn't anything like Tijuana.

Q: I talked to somebody who was consul general in Tijuana and an officer went every day to the jail.

The one problem that drives consular officers up the wall in the Arab world and that is the charming young guy who goes to the United States to get a degree, gets married. The blushing bride comes to the place, she has a child or children and she decides "This ain't for me" and it usually isn't, once she sees what the Arab family and the role of a woman, she can't take the kids. Did you have that problem?

LIMBERT: We did have those. Not so much children issues. I don't remember that many marriages between UAE citizens, UAE men and American women. Those were still rare. Many of the young students, when they went, were already married when they went to the States. There were occasional cases and as you know they can get very nasty. It only takes one to get very nasty and very time consuming. Saudi Arabia, I think, was much more difficult but in the UAE there were one or two. There was one, I think, where a woman was in an abusive relationship with her husband. I don't remember if there were children involved but there was a vice consul who did a very nice job, helped her out, got her to the airport, sheltered her, made sure she got on the airplane and, of course, as many of us predicted, a few weeks later she was back, human nature being what it is. People knock consular work but it's unlike anything else that we do.

Q: Again, how did you fit into this peculiar thing, where Dubai was a coequal, more or less, with Abu Dhabi and Sharjah and the other emirates. Did you have a ruler sitting there, how did you work with the embassy?

LIMBERT: I reported to the deputy chief of mission, who at that time was Ron Neumann, who also had had Iran experience, so we had an effective team. Our consular district was Dubai and the other five so-called northern emirates and that's what we covered.

Q: First place, were nephews killing their uncles in order to become ruler or something? In those days almost every one of the rulers got bumped off, at least it seemed like, by a near relative.

LIMBERT: That seemed to have passed. Certainly that had been the case in Abu Dhabi in pre-oil days. Sheik Zayed had come to rule by deposing his brother, Shakhbut. Dubai had had its share of that sort of thing in the Thirties and Forties, I believe. There was a war between the two sides of the creek, between Dubai and Deira at one point, which the Dubaians loved to talk about. In Sharjah, there had been problems more recently, I think around 1980 or so, between the ruler and his brother. But that seemed to have gone off. A lot of money, well distributed, helped a lot.

In Dubai, the rule had passed to the eldest son of Sheikh Rashid. He was not the most competent, but he was deferred to and established as the ruler. So, whatever their personal relations were and whatever differences there were, at least they were able to operate together very effectively.

Q: We had an ambassador who would get instructions, demarches to present to the emirates, but did you have a role in explaining what this was, down at your level or the ambassador took care of that, that wasn't your business?

LIMBERT: We were very careful and the emirates were very careful about this. Government-to-government relations worked at the capital and Dubai itself was very careful not to create its own foreign policy and, again, to leave the federal functions for the federal capital. The ambassador would frequently travel to Dubai and the northern emirates and when he did so he would usually visit the rulers and essentially carry out the same demarche or explanations in those places. But that was very much for the ambassador to do. It was very important for them to go visit these people.

I could do it. I could see the rulers if I needed to and very often if the ambassador couldn't do it I would do it. But the preference was for the ambassador or the chargï¿½ to do these things themselves.

Q: Okay, now we come to August 1990. What happened?

LIMBERT: As we like to say, everything changed.

Q: Where were you in August 1990?

LIMBERT: I was in Dubai. I was in my second year as consul general there and getting ready to go on R&R.

Q: It's a good time to get the hell out of the Gulf.

LIMBERT: Indeed.

Q: Let's talk a bit about, prior to all hell breaking loose, were there clouds gathering? How did you see it from the perspective of Dubai?

LIMBERT: Go back two years earlier. The Iran-Iraq War ends, on terms favorable to Iraq. Iraq emerges as a regional power. It has essentially beaten the Iranians. It has this large army and very large debts. Economically it's not in good shape. Again, in hindsight, it's not hard to see that Saddam, with his ambitions and his pretensions to regional leadership, was going to do something.

The interesting thing is, if you look at the history, Saddam saw himself as a second Saladin to unite the Islamic world, to unite the Arabs, presumably in the direction of liberating Palestine. But in order to liberate Palestine he always took some odd directions. First he went in the direction of Iran and then he went in the direction of Kuwait. Maybe somebody should have told him that Palestine lies in another direction. But his calculation, I think, was "If I do this as a champion of Arabism and Islam, I defeat the heathen Persians, I defeat the rich and effete Kuwaitis, whom nobody in the Arab world likes very much. If I do all that, others will rally to my banner. I will become a Saladin," because that is in fact what Saladin did, he defeated his nearby enemies and then marched against the Crusaders. So that is what he saw.

Q: Sitting in Dubai, what were you getting from your Trucial Coasters?

LIMBERT: Interesting, Dubai liked to think of itself as above politics, that is, "We do business, we don't get involved in politics and if others want to quarrel over such silly things, we're very happy to let others do so and make a profit out of it."

Where this played out more interestingly was in Abu Dhabi, in the federal capital. One of the targets of Saddam's rhetoric in the weeks and months before he attacked Kuwait was the Emirates along with Kuwait itself. Two main themes: one was "They lent us money during the war, we bled and fought for them. Now these ingrates want their money back." That was one. Two was, these countries are overproducing crude oil at a time the Iraqis, having fought this war for their sake, are in desperate need of revenue. By overproducing crude oil, the Emirates and others are keeping the price artificially low.

Q: Was there much Iraqi threat or influence there, or was it pretty much Iran that was the colossus?

LIMBERT: Iran was a much larger presence, certainly in Dubai. Iraq is farther away, Iran is much closer. Remember that the Emirates as a whole had backed the Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq War, with various degrees of discretion. In the case of Iran, the Iranian seizure and then continued possession of the three disputed islands in the Gulf continued to fester, particularly in the capital. Again, this was not an issue that concerned Dubai very much.

Having said that, a couple of things happened as the situation heated up in July of 1990. One was that Sheik Zayed gave an interview, I don't remember to whom, in which he said, "If Israel is our enemy number one, the United States is our enemy number two." Nobody quite knew what to make of it, at a time when relations, at least publicly, were pretty good. They weren't all that close but they certainly were not bad and that statement seemed out of place. The second thing that happened was as things got a little bit hotter and Saddam continued his threats, the Emirates came to us and asked for us to supply AWACS, the surveillance aircraft

Q: Airborne radar system.

LIMBERT: So they could presumably have advanced warning of any Iraqi aerial threat. The U.S. first reaction, having typically not getting very close to the UAE in military relations, was to say, "Well, the Saudis have AWACS. Why don't you go and ask the Saudis for coverage and cooperation?," to which the answer was a very frosty "If we had wanted to ask the Saudis, we would have asked the Saudis. We didn't, we asked you." Of course what a lot of this went back to was a very old traditional dislike between Abu Dhabi emirate, not the UAE as a whole, and Saudi Arabia.

Q: This is Buraimi?

LIMBERT: This is Buraimi. This goes back to the Fifties, but it's still there, working beneath the surface. So what you had was a reemergence of what people used to call the skip-step political setting of the Persian Gulf, where you didn't get along with your neighbor but you got along fine with the next person beyond him. For example, for a long time Saudi Arabia's relations with Abu Dhabi were not very good and for a long time it had good relations with Dubai and kept a consulate in Dubai, even before it had an embassy in Abu Dhabi. So Abu Dhabi came back and said, "Look, we're not asking the Saudis, we're asking you." I think we were seriously considering the request. I can't remember exactly if we had responded to it before August 1st, before the invasion, or not, because once the invasion happened the request was overtaken by events. But had the invasion not happened, I think we probably would have gone ahead with it.

Q: Was anybody saying, "Hey, watch out for these Iraqis, they're going to do something" or were we feeling on edge at all or not?

LIMBERT: As a culture in the Foreign Service, we're not very good with drastic actions, major changes. We look for common ground, we look for settlements, we look for agreement, for the arrangement that will prevent all-out resort to force. Just speaking personally, because no one was asking my opinion at the time, given the history, what Saddam had done in the past and what I told my friends and contacts there that we spoke to, there was no reason he would not act, if he thought he could get away with it. Look at his patterns of action up until then.

Q: Okay, let's move on. What happened, from your perspective? What were you up to

LIMBERT: My daughter had recently had her 21st birthday and as a present to her, she and her mother flew together to Damascus, went overland to Aleppo, to Adana on the southern coast of Turkey, were going to Istanbul and then they were going to fly to the States. I was going to fly to the States. We had a big family wedding in Los Angeles and I was getting ready to leave.

On the 1st of August we woke up to the news of the invasion, but there was no internet at the time and the local Emirates stations didn't carry the news and we only got it through Teheran Radio, the BBC and the other foreign stations. The reaction in Dubai that I saw was little short of panic. There were rumors flying, people were calling me, calling the consulate, saying "What should we do? Should we leave? Should we stay? Should we send our families away? Should we do this? Should we do that?"

Americans, but others, too, were figuring that we knew something., The local media were saying nothing, not even reporting that such a thing had happened. You'd turn on the radio and they were playing Top 40 songs, as though everything was just fine. But there were rumors that the Iraqis had moved into Saudi Arabia, there were rumors that Iraqi planes were using poison gas bombs.

The other thing that happened was that there was very little American military presence in the Persian Gulf at that time. This was pretty much a backwater as far as the U.S. military was concerned. I think there was, the command ship, the La Salle was there and then two or three cruisers and destroyers in the Gulf at the time and that's all there was.

Kuwait, as we know, fell very quickly and the question was what are the Iraqis going to do now? What's going to happen in Saudi Arabia, what's going to happen in Bahrain? The joke going around town was that Saddam met with his generals as this happened and he said, "Okay, now that we have taken Kuwait, how long would it take us to overrun Saudi Arabia?" and his generals said, "Sir, probably about a week." He said, "What about the Emirates?" "A couple of days." "What about Bahrain?" "Bahrain, we don't even have to go there. Just send them a fax."

There's a certain truth in that, in the sense that a lot of these places saw themselves as helpless and were going to see which way the wind was going to blow. Another rumor, by the way, was that the Iranians had sent Revolutionary Guards into Dubai to control the streets. I was getting calls from all over the place asking if this was true. I said, "I'm looking out the window, I don't see any." That's about all you could do.

But the rumors really struck home to me and every since that time it affected how I operated in the Service. The rumors were getting very dangerous, because people were likely to act on the basis of rumors that Iraqis were here, Iraqis were there, the Iranians had done this, the Iranians had done that and it was affecting morale in the city. There was panic, there was a question of what's going to happen to the banks, what's going to happen to the commercial sector, what's going to happen to the port. You have this very finely woven social structure in Dubai, seventy-some nationalities there and if that comes under stress, the results could be unpredictable.

So the Dubai government did a very smart thing. They simply said, "Okay, rather than try to deny every rumor that comes out, let's just take CNN" which was the main source of news for everybody "and hook it into Dubai TV," so that if you turned on Dubai TV you got CNN. Rumors dried up overnight, because if you wanted to know what was going on, you just turned on the TV. You didn't have to call the American consulate or anybody else. If someone did call the American consulate, we'd say, "You're watching CNN. Their information is as good as anything we have."

Q: CNN, it had been around for a while but it was a fairly new phenomenon. This was the first time that CNN really came to the forefront, being the first really international sort of TV, you are there, thing. CNN, how did they get

LIMBERT: I think they were in Baghdad.

Q: Oh, they were in Baghdad.

LIMBERT: They had people in Kuwait. They had people reporting from all over the region.

So, rather than rely on a rumor that your neighbor had told you, you could at least watch and say, "Here's what the reporter is saying from Kuwait, here's what the reporter is saying from Baghdad, here's what the reporter is saying from Riyadh." There were rumors like, "Riyadh has been bombed!" Well, if you have a reporter in Riyadh, presumably he could tell you: any bombing or not?

Q: Now, what were you getting from the embassy and the State Department? In the first place, I take it, you sort of realized your vacation was probably ruined.

LIMBERT: Yeah, I said, "I'm not going on that vacation." And then my wife, when I talked to her, was in Istanbul. She and our daughter had been planning to fly on to the U.S. for this wedding and she said, "I'm sending her but I'm coming back." And that made a big impression on people. The American consul thinks it's safe enough for his wife to come back from vacation. People remarked on that to me. I went out to the airport to meet her and word got around.

We did not send out families. We went to what was called an authorized departure of dependents. Dependents could leave if they wanted to. I think very few did. I don't think any did out of Dubai. A few did out of Abu Dhabi.

Q: Did you feel you were caught in the problems that, I interviewed Ken Stammerman who was consul general in Dhahran at the time and also Chas Freeman and there's a real problem in that we relied on the oil to keep coming out of Saudi Arabia, which relied on a lot of Americans and we didn't want to pull all the Americans out, American civilians. So it got kind of dicey about, do you put them in harm's way or not?

LIMBERT: That was not a big issue in the UAE. Once people saw that we weren't moving, that the embassy community was not moving, people stayed. Most expats in that part of the world have a pretty nice life. They won't give it up easily. If anything, you have the opposite problem. If things do get bad, you have problems convincing people to leave. They say, "What are you talking about? Everything's fine!" until it's too late.

I know the situation in Saudi Arabia. Of course, they were much closer to the scene of the fighting. But the oil industry in the UAE was not very dependent on Americans. There was not a big American presence there. We estimated some 8-10,000 Americans, maybe, in our consular district, although we found a lot more when people started registering after this happened. Of course a lot of people had never registered. There were that many of them in the oil industry. There had been in an earlier period, but by 1990 it wasn't so any more.

Q: What were you doing?

LIMBERT: Actually it was pretty straightforward. It's one of those things where if you've done what you're supposed to do before the crisis hits, when things are normal, then when the crisis does hit it's a lot easier. I had made the kind of calls to establish relations with people in the government of Dubai and in the Sheikh's court. I can't say that I was personally buddy-buddy with Sheikh Mohammed, because I was not but I knew who to call in his office if I needed something and if it needed to go to him personally I could do that. If the ambassador had to do it, he could do it.

Q: Regional Security Officer.

LIMBERT: I had a very good security officer and we had excellent relations with the Dubai police. We had some relations with the Dubai military, with the port. In other words, the kinds of places that we had to deal with we could go to. And so we could say, "Look, we used to send in two warships a year. Now it looks like it's going to be two a day." We also, we went to the Dubai government and we said, "We need the use of the airport and also the military air base," which was in separate place. I didn't even know where this military air base was.

Sheikh Mohammed at the time was de facto ruler, he was not ruler in name. He simply gave the order and said, "Make it happen!" and the place ran in such a way that it did. For example, if we needed to put refueling tankers at Dubai airport it worked, and everybody cooperated. We brought a squadron of F-16's into what's called Minhad Air Base. I'd never been there, but I went out there with our military attachï¿½. It was definitely a sleepy place. There were British folks out there. They had some old British planes there. Basically we took it over. They provided meals and lodging, bunking for our air force people.

As far as I could tell, this all worked extremely well. I remember one time getting a call at two in the morning from a retired British officer who was Sheik Mohammed's advisor, who said, "Two C-130's have just landed at Dubai Airport and they don't know where they are and we don't know anything about them. Can you help us out?" I said, "Let me make a call!" This kind of thing happened, but it was done in a good spirit. Nobody shot at them, nobody yelled at them. You just had to redirect them. They were supposed to land someplace else.

The Air Force put a squadron of C-130's in Sharjah at the air base there. What was remarkable, from my point of view, was how smoothly this all went. The other thing that happened was, we started getting more and more ship visits, because the navy discovered Dubai, which it had never paid much attention to before and it was a great liberty port. The men sitting on the ships, not knowing what was going on but cruising up and down, needed to get them off the ships for a while. Then we had the first ever, in my experience in Dubai, we getting calls from marine amphibious ships, these are these wonderful ships of what's called the Gator Navy.

Q: Ships with names like Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima.

LIMBERT: Exactly, Leyte Gulf and others. Definitely low tech. Most of them are old, most of them are grotty, they're not spit and polish but they're designed to put marines ashore. On them would come not only several hundred sailors but maybe up to a thousand marines. Everyone's thought was, "Oh, my God! What's going to happen? It's going to be the end of the world! The town's going to get torn up!"

Well, we worked very closely with the ship's officers, with the marine officers and these guys were as good as gold when they came ashore. We had very few incidents. Dubai businesspeople, local hotel owners and others, came up to me and said, "You know, these young Americans are so polite! They're so nice!" The image they had, from the movies or from television, was somewhat different, but these young, 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds surprised their hosts, I mentioned that to some of the officers and they said, "Well, we do two things: one, we know who the liberty risks are and they never get off the ship and those that do, we scare the hell out of them. We show them films like Midnight Express. We tell them that there is no Status of Forces Agreement with Dubai" (there wasn't) "so if they did anything they would end up in a Dubai prison" which actually was not that bad. They somewhat exaggerated the Dungeon of Dubai, where they told the men you would never be heard of again.

Q: Share it with lions, or something.

LIMBERT: Exactly. So between those two strategies, that generally got the attention of most of the liberty parties. Now tourism, of course, which was a big revenue earner for Dubai, had dried up, as you might imagine. The airport was pretty empty. But all of the sailors and marines and not only American; as the coalition built up, you had all of the sailors and marines from the coalition, made up at least in part for the loss of other tourism revenue.

Q: The Emirates military contribution, did you get any reflection of what they were doing?

LIMBERT: They put together a contingent together, I don't remember the size, several hundred men, I believe, maybe battalion sized and sent it to the front as part of the coalition and I think they took some casualties during the fighting.

Q: I think they did quite well up on the Saudi-Kuwaiti border.

LIMBERT: Exactly.

Q: There was a battle in a Saudi town. I think they were involved.

LIMBERT: I don't remember exactly where it was, but I know that they did send a contingent off and there were three or four dead and some wounded.

Q: Was there any feeling about what was happening in Iran, because of the close connections there. Did you get any reflection of how the Iranians in the Trucial States and even in Iran were, what their thought process was?

LIMBERT: The question that everyone posed was: what are the Iranians going to do about this? I think what happened was Iran's first reaction was to wait and see which way the wind is blowing. And they saw that there was this large coalition building up against the Iraqis and even the Syrians were in it with a full armored division. The Argentineans, the Italians, the Spanish, the French, Egyptians were all involved in this. Then the Iranians were very happy to choose sides with what looked like the winners.

The Iranians, the way I put it was, they made themselves a tacit member of the coalition. They got out of the way of the fleets and the aircraft.

Q: There were probably inadvertent flyovers of Iranian territory by our aircraft.

LIMBERT: I'm sure there were. Nobody ever said anything. They couldn't have been all that disappointed at seeing Saddam get hit, considering what he had done to them. They did shed some crocodile tears for their poor Iraqi brothers, but the tenor of it was such that by not saying much they became a tacit member of the coalition.

Q: Were there any extraordinary events, visits or anything like that, while you were there, that affected you particularly?

LIMBERT: Not in Dubai. Someone might have come to Abu Dhabi, most probably for a few hours. We did have General Schwarzkopf come, and he visited Dubai for a couple of hours. Of course we had aircraft carriers come in.

Q: That's a whole city!

LIMBERT: I remember taking the Kuwaiti consul general out to the aircraft carrier. The navy is so good about these visits. They open the ships for visits, they receive people very, very well and they run boats out from the port out to the ships. They could not have dealt better with the host population. As I said, there were very few incidents of a kind that you might expect when you get young foreigners loose in a port; but very few incidents came to my attention. This thing pretty much ran itself.

What I found interesting from a personal point of view is that, of course, people do respect power. I found that my own access and status as the American representative had risen considerably, because people in that part of the world had not seen what the U.S. could do: the carriers, the F-16's, the effective power that the U.S. could bring to bear at such a distance in such a short time. That was an eye opener to people.

Q: The worldwide fascination with the war as it started, with CNN showing the smart weapons, it was selective but it seemed that you could send a missile through a window in an office building and get it to the file cabinet to the left. This is the sort of thing that people would see and all over the world people were watching CNN and particularly if you happened to be up close, this must have mesmerized

LIMBERT: The fact that the Iranians and the Iraqis had fought this war for eight years and it had ended more or less as a stalemate. Maybe it was in favor of the Iraqis but essentially as a stalemate. Now the fact that the Iraqis were put to flight in a few days made a huge impression on people.

Q: Were there any issues that came up that you can think of?

LIMBERT: Well, one issue that came about, almost came of this at the time, was what's going to be the political future of the Gulf States? In other words, could the UAE continue to be ruled by an oligarchy of sheiks and princes and merchant families? As I left in the summer of '91, this discussion was continuing and you certainly did see an opening up of the political process in Kuwait. You saw it in Bahrain. You saw the beginnings of it in Qatar and in the Emirates. The sense was, "Look, we really need to rethink the way we do our political business."

The other question was, who are our friends? Before this, the media in Dubai was often beating the drum for the Palestinian cause and many of the people who operated the media were Palestinians. They set up a drumbeat of pro-Palestinian, anti-American broadcasts and telecasts. When most Palestinians came out in favor of Saddam, that pushed the people in the UAE to reconsider their relations with the Palestinians and a lot of those senior Palestinian officials were gone and you saw a change of tone, certainly a change of tone in the media.

Q: Were you seeing a developing new leadership, embryonic, maybe, but young people who'd been educated in the West and also women, beginning to make themselves felt?

LIMBERT: No. There was a group of people who'd studied abroad. There were U.S.-educated people returning. But in terms of influence on the political system, at that time it was hard to see. Most of them in Dubai were happy to go into the family business. My sense was that was going to change as the numbers grew and they would question the power of the existing oligarchy.

But you were already seeing a generational change. One of the very interesting thing I saw first hand, which I had never seen before, was the cooperation between the sons of the two patriarchs of the UAE, i.e., Sheik Rashid of Dubai and Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi. These were "the two Sheik Mohammeds," Sheik Mohammed bin Zayed and Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid. You saw the two of them work together in a straightforward, non-ceremonial, no nonsense kind of way. Very impressive. That was a change. When I saw that, I said, "There is change coming to this place. A newer generation is coming in and they are going to make changes."

But as far as the kind of people that you were talking about, yes, they would eventually work themselves into the ruling structure, they would work themselves into the political structure, but you weren't seeing it yet.

Q: Had there been any influx of Kuwaiti refugees and all?

LIMBERT: There had indeed. A lot showed up in Dubai. Now, the stereotype of the Kuwaitis among many Arab people is not a very complementary one. They are considered too rich, too arrogant, too self-satisfied. But Dubai is a bit of an exception. In Dubai, the Kuwaitis were really liked and the reason was that back in the tough times in Dubai, the pre-oil days, the Fifties, when Dubai didn't have much, the Kuwaitis were among the first to help and they were very generous. The Kuwaitis established some of the first schools. They established one of the first modern hospitals there. I believe it was Kuwaiti money that paid for the dredging of the famous Dubai Creek, the estuary. Once that was done oceangoing dhows could start the gold smuggling trade. The creek provided a sheltered harbor where none had existed and allowed these oceangoing dhows to start running gold back and forth to India.

Q: A dhow, by the way, is a large sailing vessel.

LIMBERT: Well, it was sailing originally, but they put in very sophisticated engines and electronics in order to evade and outrun the Indian coast guard. There's a romanticized and fictionalized version of this in Robin Moore's novel Dubai. A real piece of trash, but a lot of fun to read. He has a fictionalized account of a gold smuggling trip to India. That was the basis of Dubai's income until oil started coming

Q: I remember in Dubai, in the souq there, seeing two men carrying a very small box on their shoulders with poles, obviously heavy as hell. I didn't think it was raisins.

LIMBERT: It was all quite legal, from the Dubai point of view. They bought the gold in Europe, flew it to Dubai, loaded it on these dhows and then smuggled it into India. It only became smuggling on the Indian side. But it was the Kuwaitis who I believed had financed the original dredging of the creek that allowed this to go on and the Dubaians, like many people in that part of the world, don't forget someone who does you a favor.

So they were hospitable to the Kuwaiti refugees. To see Kuwaitis as refugees, to put it mildly, was somewhat anomalous. A lot of them ended up in Dubai having been thrown out of hotels in Europe. Apparently the Europeans were just awful, because the Kuwaitis' credit cards weren't good anymore and once they couldn't pay they were basically thrown out on the street. But, as I said, the Dubaians were very hospitable. There was none of this once they got there. The one story I remember which was going around Dubai, which was I thought very, very funny, was that in the one of the supermarkets someone had put up a little notice on the bulletin board saying, "Sri Lankan family is searching for Kuwaiti houseboy."

Q: Talk about tables turned!

LIMBERT: That's right.

Q: Okay, summer of '91, whither?

LIMBERT: Summer of '91, left Dubai. It was a wonderful assignment, by the way, in a lot of ways. Part of the reason was that we'd been there before, back in '75-'76 and so I knew some of the merchant families from that time, when they were not quite so rich or prominent as they became and so was able to reestablish contact with them. Also, my wife, being Iranian, felt very much at home and people looked at her very differently from the way they looked at me. She was one of them and many of the Dubaians are in fact of Iranian origin, still speak either Persian or a rather interesting southern Iranian language of their own. So they did not see her as a foreigner. They saw her as one of them.

Even the Arab Dubaians have an interesting relation with Iran. Many have intermarried with Iranians. They love the Iranian cuisine, they love the Iranian music. So the cultural influence is very strong.

She worked both sides of the veil. Essentially, because of her presence, we could associate with Dubaian families in a way that would have been much harder otherwise and we became family friends with people. So we were invited to weddings, we were invited to family meals, for people who greatly value their privacy and traditionally for whom the family is a very private realm. To this day when we go to Dubai, we go and see friends there and we'll usually have lunch and the wife and the children and the grandchildren and we've remained in contact with Dubaian friends in a way that we really have not done in other parts of the world. So it was a very satisfactory assignment.

Q: Well then, whither?

LIMBERT: Then I had been promoted to FS-1, finally. It had taken me seven years. It's about the equivalent of a colonel. I think I was promoted to FS-1 after 16 or 17 years in the Service. I had thought I was going to remain an FS-2 forever but finally was promoted.

At that time in the Service (and I think they still do this) the ideal is that after you reach that grade, on your first transfer you go for a year of what's called senior training, which was either at the various War Colleges or to university. There are some university slots as well. Our son at that time was in his third year at MIT, so when we looked at the choices, there was a chance to go to the Harvard Center for International Affairs. I had to make three choices. So when I showed the list to my wife, she said, "Make three choices: Harvard, Harvard and Harvard. I want to be near my son."

So we spent a year at what is now the Wetherhead Center. It was called the Center for International Affairs at that time and they have a wonderful program, where they bring together about twenty people a year, mostly diplomats from different countries, including an American. It includes some American military officers and then they'll have a British diplomat, a Swedish diplomat, a Japanese diplomat. Then they had a Colombian businessman, they had a Cameroonian journalist and, for the first time ever I think, they had a Soviet diplomat. Remember, this was 1991.

Q: Just before he ceased being a Soviet.

LIMBERT: Exactly. I asked him, "What are you?" He said, "I was a Soviet diplomat. I think I'm a Russian diplomat now."

So we went to Cambridge for nine months.

Q: What would you say was the approach and how, as a Foreign Service Officer, did you see how they were looking at things, particularly the faculty and all?

LIMBERT: Harvard is always Harvard. This was my third time there. I'd been there as an undergraduate, I'd been there as a graduate student. I must say, this was definitely the way to do it. There were no grades, there were no required papers, there were no exams. It was like having this enormous buffet in front of you not only from Harvard, but from MIT, from Fletcher, from Boston University, really anything in the Boston area was available. So I went to a class on the history of Jerusalem. I went to another class on Renaissance Florence. I participated in a wonderful program at the law school, which was Roger Fisher's negotiation workshop, which was an excellent program. But Harvard, being Harvard, lives pretty much in its own world and is very self-sufficient.

Q: Were you picking up things from the other diplomats and all, different perspectives, did you find this changed you?

LIMBERT: I don't know that it did. Remember, now, this is after almost twenty years in the Service. People are mostly in their late forties, early fifties. By that time, most of us are pretty set. I don't know how much it actually changed my views. I know the idea is to teach people, but I'm afraid you're getting to the old dog stage at this point. The other thing was, for many of the folks there, their concerns were things very unfamiliar to me: European strategic policy, NATO integration. I suppose this stuff is important and I suppose it matters, but, frankly, I found it somewhat less than fascinating.

What was interesting was to talk to people like the Soviet colleague, who, it turned out, was an Afghan specialist and spoke very good Persian. We found we had a lot in common and became good friends. Or, for example, the Cameroonian. But it was heavily European, eurocentered, which was interesting to hear about.

Q: Of course you did have a problem in the Balkans.

LIMBERT: That hadn't quite boiled up yet. We had a Canadian representative there from their commercial service and it's traditional that this program that the Canadian government sponsors a ten-day trip for the group and it was excellent. We went to Quebec and Montreal and of course Ottawa and then all the way out to the West, to Vancouver, and to Victoria. The Canadians, first of all they were very hospitable and very nice to us. Like most Americans, I knew very little about Canada. Canadians know a great deal about us, but we know very little about Canada and so we heard endless discussions of nationality policy and immigration policy and Canadian identity and this and that and finally, one of my colleagues, he was from Singapore, said, "I really admire you Canadians. In most of the world, if people have problems they shoot each other. You just bore each other to death."

But that trip was certainly one of the highlights. We did a Europe trip, which was great fun, because we went to Germany very shortly after unification. We went to Sweden, where I had never been, which I found an fascinating place. They took the non-Americans, they could not take us, on a trip around the United States, including some of the very poor areas in the South and that was an eye-opener for them. Fortunately, they also took them to the wine country in California, so it wasn't a total downer.

It's a great program, a chance to sort of recharge batteries. You do get in contact with academics. The negotiation workshop was probably the only course I'd ever done at Harvard that was actually of some use in the real world.

Q: So, whither in '92?

LIMBERT: Well, '92, I had to go back into the Foreign Service assignment system. I put down some places that I would be interested in and I got a call from the personnel system saying, "We noticed that in your 19 years in the Service you've never had a Washington assignment." I said, "I was hoping you wouldn't notice that." They said, "No, no, you've gotta have a Washington assignment." I'd assiduously avoided that for 19 years.

So I looked around and looked at what there was and I ended up back here at FSI, as the head of orientation. If you've gotta have a Washington assignment, this is definitely the place to come. In those days, it was '92, we were still down in Rosslyn, which was truly a horrible place to be.

Q: A high rise building in which elevators were overcrowded. It was not very pleasant.

LIMBERT: It was just a nasty building. How anybody learned anything down there I don't know. In the A-100 room, the ceiling was about six and a half feet high, had pillars everywhere and had no windows. It was really a very unhealthy, sick building, but people did learn. There was a windowless cafe in the basement. The elevators were like the Beltway at rush hour, but people did learn stuff. I must say I thoroughly enjoyed working there.

Q: You did that from

LIMBERT: '92 to '94. In the middle of it, we moved out to this campus.

Q: Let's talk about orientation. What did that mean?

LIMBERT: That's a good question. Basically I looked at it as a combination of being Dean of Freshmen and a drill instructor at marine boot camp. We took all new employees to the State Department. That means we did orientation for new civil servants, we did orientation for new generalists, meaning officers, the famous A-100 class, which was our flagship and we also did orientation for Foreign Service specialists. Then we had a few special courses for various cats and dogs.

But what we had to do, particularly in the Foreign Service case, was to take people who had been doing other things, whether they had been in private business or the military or academics or students somewhere or lawyers, teachers and turn them into members of the Foreign Service. For officers we had nine or ten weeks to do that, for specialists we had like three and a half or four weeks. It was basic training, because others would teach someone how to become a consular officer or teach someone how to be a communicator but we had to somehow imbue an ethos of the Foreign Service.

Q: What you're participating in now, this oral history program, is something that I've often felt is lacking. I think of West Point or Annapolis, the Long Gray Line. When you come in, there are many people who've done this before, since Ben Franklin, but there's very little knowledge of what people had been through and done. How did you face this problem, or could you deal with it?

LIMBERT: We didn't deal with it very well, because as an organization, as a culture, what you discover is that despite your best efforts and the best efforts of this project, we are what I would call ahistorical.

Q: The most ahistorical outfit you could run into, from people brought in with a knowledge of history.

LIMBERT: That's right. The idea that there is a tradition out there, from Franklin and Jefferson and George Kennan and others. But memory of a very long and noble tradition of things that people have done isn't there. It doesn't seem to be central, very unlike what I find at the Naval Academy. There are very few buildings named for famous alumni. We have the Truman Center, we have the Shultz Center. Is there anything named for Kennan?

Q: There's a Kennan auditorium.

LIMBERT: There's a Kennan auditorium. We have the Acheson auditorium, we have Loy Henderson, but somehow it's not the same thing. We don't deal very well with history. It seems to me the military does it much better. Military units have their own historians. There is an Office of the Historian in the Department but it's a very small office, very underfunded and as I remember it used to be stuck way out somewhere.

Q: It also spent most of its time dealing with, how many times did a Secretary visit Ouagadougou or collecting and sorting through the Foreign Relations series, essentially communications between the field and Washington.

LIMBERT: So essentially it's been left to operations like ADST and your operation to do something.

Q: So we're hoping, what we're doing is, we want to get the experiences that you and others have had and somehow pump it back into system. We're working on that.

Anyway, what were sort of the challenges you felt you faced and dealt with?

LIMBERT: A couple of things. I discovered, not to my great surprise, was that running orientation as a mid-level officer is a bit like being a baseball coach or a basketball coach. Everyone knows how to do it and you will get lots of advice and lots of people will tell you, "Now when I was in A-100 we did this or that and this was terrible. They really need this or that." We found there was no shortage of folks willing to give me advice as to how it should be done. There was no shortage of people who were willing to come over and impart their wisdom to the new Foreign Service people. One dealt with that very diplomatically. We are trained, at least, in that kind of diplomacy.

Another was breaking down the balkanization of the Service, that is this mentality of Civil Service versus Foreign Service, of Foreign Service specialists versus Foreign Service generalists, of political officer versus admin officer versus consular officer versus USIA officer. And the mantra that we set up was "We are all fingers on the same hand." That is, everything has to work. What we found, however, was that we were pushing against a very pervasive and toxic mindset of divisiveness.

Q: Even at the beginning level?

LIMBERT: Even at the beginning level. The new specialists and generalists, they're very smart people. They pick things up very quickly. So we would get someone to come in to talk very early on and he started talking about "Euroweenies."

Q: Euroweenies? In other words, EUR. I never heard the term, but it sounds like somebody who's sort of a European expert,

LIMBERT: Exactly, a disparaging term for people who spend a lot of their time in Europe. They're not in the "real" Foreign Service, 'cause they haven't been to Ouagadougou or Monrovia or Rangoon or some other place, so they're "Euroweenies" and somehow you can dismiss them.

We had someone come in to talk about USIA, and she spent the whole time slamming the State Department and its Foreign Service, saying how terrible it was to USIA. This stuff is not helpful. Our new folks are very smart and it takes them about a second and a half to pick up this prevailing ethos. They would see this. I would plead with our speakers, "Don't do this! You cannot overestimate how damaging, how toxic, it is, this kind of mentality, for the Service." It's a tough fight.

I wanted to get people involved in the training, because, after all, these were the people who'd carry after I was gone and after my contemporaries were gone. These were the rudimentary days of e-mail. I created something called "Friends of A-100" and sent out information about the programs.

To get back to this balkanization, the other issue was specialists. Somehow people came in with the idea, "Well, these people are just specialists, so they're not so important as generalists." Not true. Again, we had to fight a prevailing ethos in the Department about that. I remember, for example, we did swearing ins for specialists, we did swearing ins for new civil servants. We wanted to show that this was a vital part of our family. Well, try to get speakers for these swearing ins. This was before the Powell days and the Rice days, who both paid attention to these kinds of things. This was not the case in 1991-1992. We were lucky to get anybody to do these things. If we could get a deputy assistant secretary from the oceans and environment bureau, we were doing pretty well. We couldn't get a photographer to come and take a class picture. They would say, "These are civil servants. What do we care?" Very tough things to do and that was probably where we had to focus.

The other thing we encountered was, during '93 and '94, we met the financial tough years, in which the exam wasn't even given, the new classes either didn't exist or were very small. There just weren't enough people coming into the Service and at the same time they were encouraging people with buy-outs, to leave the Service. Promotions were drying up, recruiting was down, training was being neglected. You saw the handwriting on the wall. You could see that we were going to have to pay for this sooner or later, but the Department was looking to cut in any way it could.

That was the period when a lot of Civil Service staff was cut. Try to get a travel voucher processed. You had a question about travel or finance, you'd be very lucky to find anybody to answer it. Those were not good years for the Service.

Q: We keep talking about the A-100 course and I would think that this should be a highly competitive place for a junior mid-career officer to be sort of the den mother for, because it's where you want to put out your guy or girl with the big medals, a real winner to act as a role model and also give them experience in bringing this group along. How about that?

LIMBERT: Well, it's like anything else in the Service. My deputy was also the head of A-100 and I was very lucky, I had very good deputies. I had Jeff Moore at one point and Greg Sanford. The people there were a cross section of the Foreign Service. They were very good officers who obviously liked what they were doing. It was very important that you care about the Service, that you care about people. Jeff Moore's mantra to these guys and it caught on was, "Whatever else you do, don't be a jerk." One of the groups took that and made a tee shirt and put it in Latin.

Another mantra we had was to build a culture and a background of people who are very strong individual performers, who have made their way in the world on the basis of individual merit and competence and brilliance, to get them to be part of the team, part of a group which supports each other. Very tough to do. We pulled out a line from a movie, from Married to the Mob, we paraphrased as "Like us or not, we are your friends." To somehow inculcate that ethos into the group.

Q: I got a little taste of this. At one point I was an examiner, the oral examine, in the days when we used to tell people whether they passed or failed and the people we were seeing were people who had passed everything all their lives and two out of three were being told "No, you didn't make it." We did it right after the exam

LIMBERT: I remember that.

Q: This was very hard, because these weren't people who had ever, they were winners, we were essentially seeing winners and they were told, "Well, try again but this time you didn't make it." So the people who were coming through were people who'd essentially always been told they were going to make it.

Did you feel that you got much interest and support from the Secretary of State and the upper reaches of the State Department?

LIMBERT: Well, it depends on how you define "upper reaches." When we arrived it was the height of the 1992 presidential campaign, so Secretary Baker was not interested. That was also the period of the infamous Tamposi incident.

Q: Who was head of Consular Affairs.

LIMBERT: Exactly, so it was one of those times where you really appreciate democracy, because you have a chance to vote your bosses out of office.

When Warren Christopher came in, we made a push to get him more involved in what we did. So we invited him to preside over the first swearing that we had after he became Secretary of State and he agreed. Well, the arrangement was he was going to do the swearing in in the Ben Franklin Room up on the eighth floor. He had to come from his office on the seventh floor to come into the room. If you remember the Ben Franklin Room, there are like four entrances to it. There's the elevator entrance, there's the Treaty of Paris Room entrance, there's a kitchen entrance and there's a back room entrance; three or four different entrances. Beth Jones, bless her heart, I think was the executive secretary, and she said, "He's coming in over there." So of course, as the director, I was there to meet him. I felt a personal bond, I didn't know him but I'd met him in Algiers when he had negotiated our release from Tehran and he had been on the ground in Algiers. So we were waiting at this one door. Then all of a sudden they said, "No, no, he's coming in this other door." So we all go running across the room, which is quite large. Then Beth Jones, says, "No, no, no, he's coming in this other door." Well it turned out that what had happened was he was so new and none of his security detail knew how to get from his office to the Ben Franklin Room. So he ended up coming through the kitchen. Tremendous amount of confusion. The thing went off fine but I guess as a result of that he never did another swearing in after that.

We had good relations with the Director General, who was very interested in what we did and of course that was our big counterpart operation. FSI and the personnel system have to work very closely together. This was Genta Hawkins Holmes. She met with every class. Mary Ryan, who'd become head of Consular Affairs after Ms. Tamposi's departure, met also with every class.

Genta Hawkins Holmes, I thought, gave them some very good advice at one point. Knowing that she was dealing with a very smart, intelligent group of people who all knew exactly how the U.S. should run its foreign policy, she said, "When you are overseas, resist the temptation to send us a message telling us how screwed up we are. We already know that. You're not telling us anything we don't know." I thought that was very good advice. I've often quoted that to colleagues who were tempted to write a somewhat intemperate message.

Q: What was your overall impression of the intake?

LIMBERT: One of the issues we had and, again, the Director General was very interested in this, was our diversity. We weren't doing very well, in terms of going outside the traditional sources for the Foreign Service. In terms of men and women officer, I think women officers were about 35, 40 per cent of each new class, but in terms of getting African-Americans, in terms of getting Hispanics, getting others who perhaps could come in with some language and cultural skills that others didn't have, we weren't doing very well in those days. That being said, these were very smart people. Many of them had given up careers in other areas, for less money were starting over as junior officers, the equivalent of second lieutenant. Some of them were younger than my own children. Some of them were older than I was when they started off. But they all, again, were starting off at the same level.

There were lot of lawyers, a lot of people with law degrees. When I asked people about this, they said, "Well, first of all the law training draws bright people. It's good training for the Foreign Service, in terms of logic and being able to think on your feet, being able to make an argument, oral and written, and organizing an idea. But also many of these young people had gone into the law and hated it. They found it boring, they found it very unrewarding and they wanted to do other things. So typically they would come out of law school, they would go to work for a firm and be absolutely miserable. So that at least benefited the Foreign Service a great deal but it got to the point that it became almost a standing joke in the class, the number of lawyers that we would recruit.

Q: You left in

LIMBERT: '94.

Q: What did you do?

LIMBERT: I went back overseas as deputy chief of mission to Conakry, Guinea.

Q: About Guinea: what were our interests and what was going on there at the time?

LIMBERT: This was my first sub-Saharan African post. My other African post was Djibouti, which is not typical of much of anything. My other overseas assignments had all been in the Middle East but I'd been away from the Middle Eastern bureau since the time I left Dubai. Like most bureaus, if you're away for a while they do tend to forget about you, so when I did mention when I was back in the assignment cycle again after two years at FSI, there was what you come to expect: "Who are you? Why should we care about you, anyway? Go away!"

In any case, our going out to Conakry, it was really a new world and as I was doing my consultations I began to hear some strange things. I heard people tell me, "When you get there, expect that you're going to be shocked by what you see, by the disorganization, the poverty, the conditions of life." And of course my response was, "Well, I've been around. I've been in a lot of different places. I was in the Peace Corps. I was here. I was there. I don't think there's much out there that can shock me." And they said, "Well, just remember what we said. I think you will be shocked."

Guinea was on a difficult transition. Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½, the old dictator had run the country in an increasingly erratic and dictatorial way since independence,

Q: Quite nasty, too.

LIMBERT: Very nasty. When I was there you began to see how nasty it was. Guinea was the one French territory that had voted down de Gaulle's constitution in 1958. Basically they were offered continued association with France leading to independence. Guinea voted for immediate independence. It was the only French territory that did. It had been one of the richest territories in the French network in West Africa but the French simply dumped it and pulled out and left very little behind.

Well, Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ seemed to become increasingly paranoid and difficult over the years of his rule. He started in 1962. He died in 1984. Guinea went through some very bad times.

Q: I've heard stories about, political prisoners would go to jail and not be fed.

LIMBERT: That's right. It was known as the "black diet." That happened to some very senior officials. Rank and office was no protection. I don't know if this was something that Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ invented on his own or he was imitating Stalin, but one day you would be a minister or a senior diplomat and the next day you were in one of these notorious prisons and starved to death.

That happened to a very famous Guinean diplomat, a young man named Telli Diallo, who had been the secretary general of the OAS at one point. He was very well known and respected among American colleagues. He went back and was killed, starved to death in prison by Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½.

That was the legacy. Since '84 Guinea had been on a very uncertain path towards democratic change. The awfulness and the worst abuses of the Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ period were in the past. One thing that had happened was that Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ had essentially declared war against one of the three major ethnic groups of the country, the Peuhl ethnic group. They were between a quarter and a third of the population. He had proclaimed the existence of something called the "Foulah conspiracy," which basically meant that whole population of a major ethnic group was conspiring against him. As a result of that action and as a result of some very bizarre economic measures essentially abolishing the free market, an estimated twenty per cent of the population just left. It was either leave or starve to death. So hundreds of thousands, maybe over a million, went to the Ivory Coast, they went to Sierra Leone, to Liberia, to Senegal, wherever they could. Many of them were from the Peulh ethnic group, but others as well and those that stayed had a rough time in those years.

So that was what Guinea was struggling with. And when the French pulled out in 1958 they took whatever plans there were

Q: I'm told they even took the doorknobs.

LIMBERT: There are stories like that. The classic story is that as the last French aircraft was leaving, as it was taxiing it stopped at every runway light and unscrewed it, took it out. There were stories about plans of the electric grid that were thrown into the sea when the French left.

Anyway, whatever the truth, it was a very messy place. At the same time, it should have been, by all rights, a well-off country. It did not have oil, but it had just about everything else. It had good water, it could have good agriculture, it had minerals, it had fish, diamonds, gold, bauxite, all of these things. But the disorganization and the deterioration had brought it to pretty desperate straits.

Q: Had the Soviets taken advantage of this?

LIMBERT: The Soviets had, in the Seventies and Eighties. Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ was very clever in that way, he was very good at playing one side off against the other. Under Eisenhower he gets invited to the U.S., he gets a ticker tape parade in an open car with Eisenhower. This was all part of this great game with the Russians.

Q: The early opening to Africa.

LIMBERT: Exactly. And the Russians offered military training, they provided military supplies, they supplied economic aid, technicians of various kinds. A lot of young Guineans went to the Soviet Union or the Soviet allies for study. One trace of that that we saw, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were a number of Russian, Polish, Czech women living there, who had married these young Africans, these young Guineans and gone back. You wonder how awful it must have been in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at the time. At least Guinea was warm.

But there had been the classic Cold War pattern there of playing one side against the other. The unfortunate thing, it didn't benefit the country very much and the country deteriorated farther and farther into decay.

So by the time we got there, although Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ had died, the free market had reemerged, consumer goods were available, food was available. Even so, pretty much nothing worked. It was what someone called "post-apocalyptic." It was like the apocalypse had happened and we were all squatting in the ruins.

Q: Did the Guineans, did they, some groups are known for their commercial activity in West Africa, different tribes or something, what about the Guineans?

LIMBERT: Particularly this group that I mentioned, the Peulh people, who are known as Fulanis in other places. They're a large ethnic group that spread over much of West Africa. You find them in Mauritania, you find them I think in Cameroon, in Nigeria. Commercially they are very active, but for a long time there was simply no business to be done. But what we found was that many of these people were doing a very simple business with the U.S. They would come to New York, where their colleagues who were from the same area had set up businesses. In New York, they would buy a container load, usually, of consumer goods, including cosmetics, electronics, clothes, jeans, used clothing, new clothing and then consolidate it into a container and send it back.

The people who were doing this, many times, couldn't read or write. They didn't know any French, and they spoke only Fulani. And they would come to New York and they would hook up with a company in New York, I saw its documents, called the Fulani Brothers. They would hook up with these people and they would help them to do their shopping, to consolidate a shipment and send it back. People made a living this way, every year they could do one of these trips.

People were certainly enterprising enough. Of course the West African market women are famous for their abilities to manipulate different currencies. You certainly see this. West Africa is nothing if not a lively and colorful place.

Q: When you got there, what was the government like?

LIMBERT: Different words have been used: kleptocracy, thugocracy. It wasn't much of a model of anything. There's a wonderful book by a man named Attwood, who was John Kennedy's ambassador to Guinea. He'd been a journalist.

Q: He later went to Kenya, I think?

LIMBERT: He went to Kenya. He was first ambassador to Guinea.

The very first ambassador to Guinea, by the way, was a man named Morrow, appointed by Eisenhower, an African-American, a professor of French, I think, somewhere in the North Carolina university system and was the first African-American to serve as ambassador to a country other than Liberia. He has a memoir as well, which is not as famous as Attwood's, but what's remarkable about that memoir is how badly he was treated by the Foreign Service.

Q: I can imagine.

LIMBERT: Attwood got there and Guinea was a backwater for the Foreign Service and I think his comment to his staff was, "Look, the plane I came in on is still there. Any of you are welcome to go out on it." I think morale was not high. As I said he served in Kenya later on and he said one of the differences was that in the former French colonies you found a very well trained and well educated and sophisticated elite, who had been trained in the French style. So if you lunched with the minister, for example, the ministers of posts and telegraphs you would find him a charming companion who could speak in the most sophisticated way of all kinds of things, very analytical and very perceptive. But if you went to the post office, which he was responsible for, you'd find absolute chaos, because they never trained anyone who could run anything. That was certainly the case in Guinea. You still saw that in Guinea, this was thirty years later, thirty years after Attwood was there, that was certainly the case.

The combination of inefficiency and corruption and decay, that probably in a way was almost more shocking that the physical deterioration, which was extreme. But in some ways it was a scary place, because it was anarchic, also. The government really didn't control very much. There was criminality. Essentially at night you locked yourself in your house. You had private guards. The power grid was so uncertain that we had to organize a generator system. Have you ever served in West Africa?

Q: No.

LIMBERT: Well it was a different world for me. I'd never served in any place quite like this, where essentially, as the DCM, I was like the mayor of a small city. We ran a power department, we ran a water department, we ran a sanitation department, we ran our own health department, because the services were so rudimentary.

Q: When you were there, who was the ambassador?

LIMBERT: We had two ambassadors during my three years there, both excellent career people. When I got there, the first two years, Joe Saloom was ambassador, an economic officer. He's right now in Baghdad.

Q: I was starting to interview him. He retired and then they dragged him back to Baghdad.

LIMBERT: Exactly. He'd spent considerable time in Africa. He'd served in Zaire, he'd served in Niger. I think even he found Guinea a bit overwhelming. He was there two years and that was a difficult time, because they had some very violent elections before I got there. In '93 or '94, they had presidential elections which were both violent and blatantly rigged. The way it was put was, "they weren't free, they weren't fair but they certainly were transparent."

Then in 1996 Ambassador Saloom left and Tibor Nagy, who was also one of our outstanding Africa specialists, came. Tibor came from an administrative background.

So I really was fortunate. I served with two very different chiefs of mission, but both outstanding.

Q: Why were we there, what were our interests and what were you doing?

LIMBERT: Of course our original mission was Cold War and it had been much larger at one time. We'd had a large AID mission, we'd had all kinds of programs going on there, cultural exchanges and so forth. This was also a period of declining budgets for foreign affairs, in the Nineties when we were looking everywhere for things to cut. So, believe me, it was a question that we asked ourselves as well.

A lot of it boiled down to humanitarian work. We had a small AID mission there. It did good stuff, it built roads, it did some health work, some family planning, anti-HIV/AIDS. But were also working on what they called democracy and governance. I suppose if you could create democracy and good governance in Guinea you could do it anywhere. The strange thing was, I kept meeting people who'd been to various USAID-sponsored programs in the States, on democratization. This was great, but I kept thinking, "Judging by the numbers of people and the amount that they're spending to train people in democratization, this place ought to be like Switzerland."

It was anything but. The problem obviously lay elsewhere. It lay at the top. For example, one of the things that plagued Guinea and plagued a lot of countries in that region, was that you couldn't do anything or go anywhere without getting shaken down. So if you drove from point A to point B there would be 10 or 15 checkpoints and at each one people expected a bribe to let you pass. Who ran these things? Who knew? They might have had some official cover, or might have been just some local entrepreneur who set the thing up. So what our USAID colleagues called democratization or good governance had a long way to go in that place.

One of the interesting things there for me personally, was that my wife worked in the consular section. We didn't have a full time consular officer there. We had a junior officer, a first or second tour officer, who was split between consular work and some other function. So my wife was hired to do consular work and, since she spoke French, she really liked it but what a challenge that was.

The other thing was, she became known around town as the person to see for a visa. Visas, as I mentioned, were worth a great deal in material terms. It was a key to earning some money through trade. So I can remember at one point, I was chargï¿½ at the time, I went to the foreign ministry where I had some business and was waiting to see an official. Someone came by and looked at me and said, "I think I know you, don't I?" I said, "You might." He said, "Aren't you the husband of the visa officer?" I said, "Yeah, that's who I am."

Q: Was there any thought of even closing down the embassy?

LIMBERT: I think at a level in the State Department there was a debate going on, but the question was more philosophical, about something called universality. Did we want to be everywhere? Should we be everywhere? And if you are everywhere, then there's a minimum level that you have to maintain. We did end up I think closing a couple of small places. We ended up closing our embassy in the Seychelles. We had a small mission I think in the Comoros which we closed. We closed Equatorial Guinea, which we're now reopening.

But we didn't close a lot of posts. What we did was starve them to death. We took what I call the Gerald Ford approach. Gerald Ford, may he rest in peace, I don't want to speak ill of him, but I do remember in the Seventies when New York was going through one of its financial crises and had gone to the federal government for help and the response was, in the words of the famous headline: "Ford To City: Drop Dead!" That was pretty much the approach the Department took towards its African missions: no, we're not going to close you but we're going to starve you to death.

Q: This was the Sï¿½kou Tourï¿½ method.

LIMBERT: Pretty much. I don't know if they had learned that explicitly from his example. To be fair to the Department, given the level of U.S. interest in these places, these are very expensive places to run, because, again, just the bill for our generator fuel, the bill for our guard service. One thing I enjoyed in a perverse way, was, being the deputy chief of mission, you got all of these problems. You worked with the generator people, you worked with the water people, and we had the security contractor from hell. He was the only one around, but he probably created more problems for us.

We had a wonderful regional security officer who was always getting calls at two in the morning. There was always some crisis somewhere, a home invasion or somebody was stealing fuel and I admired him because going out on those streets at two in the morning was pretty dangerous. At one point we received a NIACT Immediate [i.e., a high precedence message, usually from Washington] and our duty officer, who was a young political officer at the time, had to drive to the embassy from where he lived, which was outside the city and nearly got shot at a roadblock. If you saw the roadblock, that was one thing. Sometimes you didn't even see them. Even if you did, slowing down or stopping, the guys there could be drunk or be bored or whatever else. And of course, the NIACT Immediate, like most NIACT Immediates, did not require night action by anyone. So I sent a rather nasty cable in the next day, saying, "Unless you telephone someone telling us that this thing requires immediate action upon receipt we're not going to respond until it's safe to do so. That message is going to wait until the opening of business the next morning. Most of these messages that come out are not worth putting somebody's life in danger."

I'm afraid this is a little bit stream of consciousness

Q: I take it we didn't have the Peace Corps there?

LIMBERT: We did.

Q: Oh, my God!

LIMBERT: It was probably one of the best things we had going. It was also one of the biggest things we had going, 60, 70, up to a hundred volunteers scattered around the country. A tough place for the Peace Corps: tough languages, tough living conditions. But our ambassadors, the staff, all supported them as much as we could. When I went out or when the ambassador went out we would visit the Peace Corps volunteers, we would go see them, we would take them care packages, we would show our interest in what they were doing, because it was a very, very good program.

Q: In one way, I imagine being out in the bush or the hinterland was probably safer than the city, wasn't it?

LIMBERT: It was much safer. The State Department rates posts by different threat levels and one of the categories is crime. Conakry was beyond high, it was called critical for crime. There were muggings all the time. When he first went there, Ambassador Saloom and his wife were walking on a Sunday and were mugged in front of the main church. There was no respect for persons or rank or anything else. Home invasions were constant. So if you had money of any kind, if you were a member of the middle class or above, you lived in fortresses. That's why I say, this was something out of a Mad Max movie, because you lived in these guarded fortresses with barbed wire and private security guards and then you played a cat and mouse game with the criminals. It was a very strange way to live.

Q: What about AIDS? I would think that in that era and even today it would be sort of scary, because one's servants, if you got into a tangle with people who might have AIDS, this had to be a serious concern.

LIMBERT: It was getting there. It wasn't full blown yet. You knew it was out there, you knew there was a potential, you knew what it could do, if not dealt with. But the testing, the epidemiology, the tracking, was still very rudimentary. USAID did a very good project where they brought in a group, I think it was from Johns Hopkins, who looked at what would happen. They did some projections and they told the Guineans, there are high, medium or low levels of action they could take and the consequences of each. And it was very dramatic, if they did little or nothing, what would happen in the country.

People would die, including our employees, at the age of forty something and it was never quite clear why they had died. So the assumption people made was this was AIDS related. But, definitely, it was out there. It hadn't hit full blown yet.

Q: Did you have something like a private blood bank?

LIMBERT: Of course. We had what we called a walking blood bank and you just hoped you kept healthy. What I worried about most and that we all worried about most was a traffic accident out in the boonies, where you're beyond immediate help. We did have them occasionally and they were very difficult to deal with.

There was something that I had left out when we talked about Algeria. Algeria was 1986 to '88 and I forgot one of the strange things that happened there. As you may have noticed, a lot of my assignments seemed to follow a pattern, that when I get to a post strange things happen.

Q: I've noticed.

LIMBERT: A lot of other people have, too.

In general, we were in Algeria at a good time. We were fortunate to be there then. The country was peaceful, it was making a slow economic transition. It looked like it could possibly make a political transition. It wasn't until after we left things started to go seriously wrong in the country.

But when we were there, I believe it was around November of 1987, we received a report that an Algerian group in Europe was talking about undertaking a terrorist action against personnel at the U.S. embassy. The report was remarkably specific and it mentioned assassinating two of the political officers. We only had two political officers at the time, a younger officer, Jim Foley, and myself and it identified both of us. It identified me as a 25-year-old with an Iranian wife. Well of course I was considerably older than 25 at the time. One of the first things I had to do was ask my wife about her 25-year-old husband. But the threat was very specific and very clear.

As a result, both of us, my wife and I (our children were at school away from Algiers) were taken out almost immediately on the first plane and I spent the next two months back in Washington, until the group could be rendered harmless and it was safe to go back. Turned out it was a Ben Bellist group that was looking to carry out this operation.

Q: That goes way, way back, to the beginning of the Algerian effort to liberate itself.

LIMBERT: That's right, he was the first president after 1962. But if one is going to be killed, a dinosaur will do just as well as anybody else. The group was neutralized, the threat dissipated and I think I got back to Algiers in January of 1988. We told our kids what was going on but we couldn't say anything to our families, so I just showed up in Washington on Thanksgiving Day and we ended up staying for while with my sister. We never told them what was going on or why we were there. I mentioned some vague excuse about a conference. They probably thought I had gotten in trouble at post and had been thrown out.

This incident had a very strange ending. This had happened 1987. About 2003, my wife and I were vacationing in Morocco from Mauritania and we met up with a Mauritanian friend, part Mauritanian and part Moroccan, who was there. We went out to dinner and there was a young woman with him and as we started talking to her it turned out that she was none other than the daughter of Ahmed Ben Bella. She had been raised in Europe, was very sophisticated, and very well educated. So, anyway, discreetly we took our friend aside and described what had happened and our connection to the Ben Bella family. Anyway, apparently he did tell her and she was most apologetic and most upset that this thing had happened.

Q: Was there any, Ben Bella was kept a prisoner for years, wasn't he?

LIMBERT: At some point, though, he went into exile.

Q: Was there much of a restoration movement when you were there? Was he a figure that

LIMBERT: No, that was the interesting thing. As I said, this was like being attacked by a dinosaur. You didn't expect it, but of course if they were going to do something, they were perfectly capable. The threat was just as real, whichever direction it came from.

In fact, we didn't really worry that much about personal safety in Algeria at that time. None of us had personal security. I don't even think the ambassador did any. We traveled around the country a great deal. The towns seemed quite safe. There was very little crime.

Of course, as we know, things went terribly wrong shortly afterwards.

But we arranged charter flights. I did remember the people in ELSO, in Belgium, in Antwerp, who go out and charter the airplanes, to make sure there was a backup crew on these planes or otherwise you get stuck with the question of crew rest. These planes get there, the crew can't fly, has to sleep for 10 or 12 hours and the plane is stuck on the ground. The idea was and the way we sold this to the Guineans, the only way this was going to work, was that evacuees would spend very little time in Conakry.

Well of course the standard wisdom in the Foreign Service is that they are no good evacuations and that was certainly true in this case. We found the U.S. Navy had taken off as many people as they had room for and that's fine, because the situation in Freetown, was deteriorating fast. But the result was others were left to unscramble it. Well, they brought these folks to Conakry by helicopter, they anchored the ship offshore, a short helicopter ride that brought them to the airport. There were a lot of Sierra Leoneans in the group, it turned out. Many of them walked off the helicopters and walked away to join their friends and buddies in town. The Guineans were all anxious to send them to refugee camps three days' drive away, where they had the other refugees and the last thing these urban Sierra Leoneans wanted to do was go rot in a camp somewhere. So they took their chances in town.

There were also a lot of Lebanese. The Lebanese consul there was very good. He chartered a plane, took these folks to Lebanon, which many of them had not seen in three, four generations.

Q: One of the things we sort discovered in West Africa was how the Lebanese sort of ran the Ma and Pa grocery stores and had been there since the time of the Phoenicians, practically.

LIMBERT: Well, the stories are interesting. In Guinea they were known as the Soussous blancs, the white Soussou, the Soussou being one of the big ethnic groups there. In Sierra Leone, among themselves, they spoke Krio. They did not speak Arabic among themselves. They told stories about how they had got there, many of them, back around about 1900, 1910, part of the wave of emigration that came here, to Canada, to South America. They were told they were going to Argentina, to Canada. When they got to Dakar they were told, "This is Canada" or "This is New York." They got off the boat and that's where they were. And most of them made a very good life for themselves there.

Anyway, all these people showed up. So there we were with hundreds of evacuees at the airport. We set up a command post at the airport to figure out how to deal with these people. If somebody was American, a clear American passport holder, we put them on the charter plane. They either paid for their ticket or you got a promissory note and you sent them off.

We found, however, that a number of the evacuees were American citizen infant children of Sierra Leoneans. In many cases, for example, the mother was living here in the United States, had sent the children back to Sierra Leone to live with family. Well, when the evacuation came, of course, these young children were eligible to be evacuated. The problem is, of course, how are you going to get that eight month old to the States? Who's going to take them? So we asked, who's the guardian of this baby, because the rule is that they have to go with somebody. You can issue a visa to that person, but that person has to be otherwise eligible for a visa. So what we found is that maybe half a dozen people would be fighting over who was the guardian. We had to sort all this out. It got to the point that one of our junior officers was afraid he would end up having to escort eight or ten infants in diapers back to Dulles Airport to deliver them to their mothers.

Anyway, we straightened all this out as best we could, sent these charter planes out to Brussels and London, where our colleagues did a very good job of trying to screen out who could go on. It wasn't easy, in the sense that nothing ever goes according to plan, particularly these evacuations.

We made certain promises to the Guineans. How can I say, I think we overstated the degree of organization and orderliness that we were capable of.

Q: You say you had a political officer there. What was there to report politically?

LIMBERT: The main thing was the democratic process: was there any hope for the democratic process? While we were there, they elected a parliament. It was the first freely elected parliament that Guinea had had ever. We reported about what was happening with parliament, what was happening with the opposition. We talked to the opposition regularly, we talked to the government party regularly. Was there any hope for their not cheating on the elections? Were they capable of having a fair election? It came down to a question of were they ready to admit they might lose an election. You could point to events in Senegal, to events in Mali, there was progress in the region. But for so long politics had been a winner take all game. You won and you got everything. You lost and you were, if not dead in prison or destitute or in exile. So that was the kind of reporting we did?

Q: You were there from '94 to

LIMBERT: '97.

Q: Did you see progress?

LIMBERT: Not really. Every so often we'd sit down and we'd set up a balance sheet with pluses and minuses, but it was pretty slow.

Q: What about the other embassies? Were the French back? You mentioned resources, including diamonds, but other things. I would have thought particularly European countries, much of their effort in Africa is financial. Were they involved?

LIMBERT: There was a lot of humanitarian work. The Germans did a lot of democracy support kinds of work and we worked closely with them. With the French, they had a military mission, they had some military cooperation there. But, again, the history there always sort of limited what the French could do.

Q: Sounds like you and the Germans were working on democracy and there weren't no democracy.

LIMBERT: No, it was a tough slog. The Russians were there in large numbers. The Chinese were there.

Q: What were they up to?

LIMBERT: The Chinese, they were doing commercial stuff. They brought in a lot of their companies, which were competing for contracts. They also maintained, after thirty years they were still running and maintaining the Great Peoples' Palace. They had built many of these all over Africa, but the problem was that if they left these building would go back to seed. So to keep the plumbing, the air conditioning, the electricity going they had to keep Chinese technicians there.

Q: What were they being used for?

LIMBERT: Anything and everything. They would be used for government rallies. They would be used for conferences. I think the parliament was using it. The first event, very shortly after we got there, this was in August of 1994. I was chargï¿½, the ambassador was gone, and the first event I went to there with my wife was International Women's Day. The invitation said four o'clock, so we went at four o'clock. The president didn't show up 'til 5:30. We ended up sitting next to the North Korean. When the president finally came, it was one of these staged events. They had the cheering section and he gave a speech in Soussou that nobody bothered to translate. So I didn't have great memories of the Peoples' Palace.

Q: You have any problems with fishing and that sort of thing there?

LIMBERT: Problems?

Q: So many West African countries, you have the Koreans, or the Chinese or the Russians or somebody coming and poaching all over. Was this an issue?

LIMBERT: It was, to the extent that we knew much about it. The fishing business was pretty much a black hole. We knew that things weren't right in it. We knew that the fishing boats seemed to do less fishing than they did trading in smuggled oil and gas. So they would go out and they would buy diesel fuel or gasoline from trawlers, bring it in and sell it on the black market. But there were good fish in the market. If you did sport fishing, it was wonderful. But the commercial fishing, you're right, it should have been a source of income for the country. When you looked at the balance sheet, the published figures for the budget, things like fish and diamonds and gold were zero. But you knew somebody was making money on these things, but none of it was coming in to the state treasury.

Q: What was social life like?

LIMBERT: Actually, it wasn't bad. Guinea has this reputation of being one of the worst posts in the Foreign Service. We enjoyed it and most of our people there enjoyed it. If you had a Peace Corps spirit you enjoyed it. The country was beautiful, very green, mountainous, coastlines, amazing folklore there. It was good if you could get out of town. You went out fishing, there were beaches, not in the town but around it, and there were things to see. There was the normal diplomatic stuff and then there were things in the community. Our community was large enough there could be a social life. We had softball for a while. There were AID contractor people there. So it was a pretty good social life.

Q: Then in '97 you left. Where to?

LIMBERT: I had put in a bid to go to Cairo, to be political counselor, a job I had had my eye on for a long time. That had come through and then a week later I got a call saying, "You've been selected to go to the Senior Seminar." So I went to Ambassador Nagy, who was a graduate of the Senior Seminar and asked him, "What do you think I should do?" he said, "Take the Senior Seminar."

Q: You went to Senior Seminar. You were there from when to when?

LIMBERT: It was class number forty.

Q: I was class 17. Tell me a little about it.

LIMBERT: This was academic year 1997-98. This was the premier senior training program, not only for the State Department, but for the entire U.S. government. It's a full academic year. When we were there the participants, were a mix of Foreign Service, from the other foreign affairs agencies, we had people from the CIA, we had officers from the various branches of the military, we had some Civil Service colleagues from other agencies. This was a classic gift. To be chosen, frankly, was quite an honor. We spent the academic year, and the theme was Discovering America, learning about this wonderful country that most of us had been representing through our whole careers but really didn't always know or understand that well. Part of the attraction of the Senior Seminar was the program itself. Much of it was the association with colleagues. Then there were some small pieces in the middle where they sent us off, for example, to do some volunteer work. There was another point where we set up a project for the entire month of February. And of course the saddest thing was that several years later the program was ended.

Q: One of the things, when I was there, again, I'm talking about '74-'75, looking at this, I thought of course this was a great honor. I was a consular officer, sort of the consular representative. Laurie Lawrence was the only person before me to come from the consular ranks. But I noticed there were a couple of people who were in there, senior officers getting ready to retire and they did retire, one or two. One or two had already gone to one of the senior military war colleges and the military people didn't seem to take it very seriously. Fine people, but they didn't go anywhere. It wasn't as though these were people on the way to flag rank. This may have changed by your time.

LIMBERT: There was the issue of retirement, and of people being close to retirement. That wasn't supposed to happen. People coming through, in theory, were supposed to have onward careers. Maybe they would get a mission, maybe not. A number of people in the program did. I don't remember the numbers.

But, you're right, it was one of the issues of the Senior Seminar. We were told that one of the reasons that the Senior Seminar ended was that it was not getting the quality of people it should. Or maybe the word was it was not getting the quality of people that it used to. It sounds like, from what you said, that that had been a problem all along.

Q: We had, three or four became ambassadors, but the military, this was just a nice thing but obviously if you're going to go to flag rank you went to one of the war colleges.

LIMBERT: I don't know. I didn't follow what happened to our military colleagues, but I would be surprised if they made flag rank. The military, obviously, has its own selection criteria. The interesting thing for the military people, I think, the chance to interact with the State Department over a long term, for many of them, was something of a cultural shock, because the way we operate is so different from the way they operate.

Q: In your volunteer work or your project, did you come away with anything that sort of stuck with you later?

LIMBERT: I did, actually. My volunteer project was I went and worked in a old people's facility up in Randolph, Vermont. We went and lived up in our Vermont house for a week in November and I would go over to Randolph and work there.

Q: Where's Randolph?

LIMBERT: It's in central Vermont, about 45 minutes north northwest of White River Junction. It's a small town of about seven or eight thousand people.

I did that, found it very interesting work. That was only a week.

Everyone had to work out a month's project. I volunteered to go to work for the minority staff on the House International Relations Committee. That was when Congressman Lee Hamilton was the ranking member. Now I had always wanted to either be a congressional fellow or do what they call a Pearson assignment, on Capitol Hill and never did. And since we lived on Capitol Hill and I could walk from our house to the House office buildings in about 10 or 15 minutes, it worked out very well. So I spent the month of February working with the minority staff.

And this was an interesting time, because this was the period when in Iran, President Khatami had just taken office and it looked like there was going to be a major shift in Iran's foreign relations and relations with the U.S. Remember, he had done this famous interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN. He had come to the UN and spoken about dialogue of civilizations. It looked like, after almost twenty years of deep freeze, that there was going to be some breaks and the internal Iranian political scene was opening up, a thousand flowers were blooming. Wrestling teams were going back and forth, weightlifting teams were going back and forth, there were cultural exchanges, some very interesting Iranian films were finding their way to this country, and groups of tourists were going to Iran, Iranian-Americans who had to flee Iran in the eighties were now able to go back. So it looked like there was an opening. And Lee Hamilton, who I knew of but had never worked with, I found very impressive. His staff was also a very impressive group of people and they were interested in pursuing this new opening.

So I worked up there for a month and nothing could have been more different than the atmosphere on Capitol Hill and the atmosphere at the State Department. The State Department is hierarchical. Things go up, things go down, things go sideways. Capitol Hill is not that way at all. The House of Representatives, at least is more organized into, 435 fiefdoms. Perhaps the Speaker of the House is the ruler, in the sense that the king of medieval France was the ruler. In a sense it was almost like the United Nations. There was sovereign equality. Every member is equal to every other member.

What that means is that if you work up there on the staff, you have a great deal of independence. You don't answer to anybody. So, for example, Congressman Hamilton said, "Write me a paper about Iran, what we should do about Iran, that I can use as a speech." He was very interested in what they called Track II diplomacy, non-official contacts, the sports, the culture, the parliamentary exchanges, the technical exchanges, things like that.

So I sat down and wrote something and I gave it to his chief of staff and the next I knew he was using it. It had not been picked apart. It had gone to any interagency committee. It had not been sent out to this, that and the other thing. It had not been worked over. I hadn't had to argue with anyone. You just did it and that was the way Congress worked. It was an eye opener.

The counterweight, of course, the contrast to that, was when people in Congress wanted something from the State Department they could not figure out why it took the State Department forever to answer some seemingly simple request and how this lumbering, ponderous bureaucracy could take the simplest request and turn it into a six month project. And the people on that side were simply tearing their hair out.

Q: What was the situation in Congress at the time? This was when?

LIMBERT: This would have been February of 1998.

Q: Clinton is the president, but the Congress was Republican. Had we reached the Monica Lewinski, impeachment thing and all that?

LIMBERT: Not yet. That had just broken. That had broken in January of '98, as I remember. Just about the same time as Khatami started making his approaches.

Q: The two weren't particularly related.

LIMBERT: No, but they were almost simultaneous. I remember the Senior Seminar visited Atlanta in January of '98. We went to CNN headquarters, just after the Amanpour interview and some of us wanted to talk about it. All CNN wanted to talk about was Monica Lewinski.

Q: Were you sensing, though, at that time, that month on the Hill, were you sensing the animosity that seemed to have infused Congress at that time, or not?

LIMBERT: I didn't. I wasn't in a position to pick it up. The other thing about working up there is, it's a young person's game. The working conditions are awful. The offices are terrible, most of them windowless, there's no space, even for the senior people. The hours are very long, demands are very heavy.

But I didn't really get the sense of the partisan animosity. Maybe I just wasn't looking for it.

Q: It wasn't particularly an area where it was asserting itself so much.

LIMBERT: No, not in the international area. What I did enjoy up there, also, is that the legislative branch is a like an open university. There was always something interesting going on up there. There were talks all the time, Congressional Research Service had programs going on, other people had things going on, you could go to these talks, they were open for congressional staff.

There was even a presentation by that crazy group, the Iranian Mujahadeen-e-Khalq. I think at the time it was on the list of foreign terrorist groups but they had their congressional friends. They did a presentation about the human rights situation in Iran. I remember going up there and saying, "What are these people doing on Capitol Hill? They have no business on Capitol Hill! This is a very unsavory and dangerous group of people." And I can remember going to Congressman Ney at the time, because the Mujahadeen were very interested in him, because of his connections with Iran.

Q: Who was he?

LIMBERT: Congressman Ney was a Republican congressman from Ohio who, it turned out, as a young man, in the late Seventies, had lived in Shiraz, and taught English there for a while. I think he had gone there to visit a college friend who was Iranian. Ney also spoke pretty decent Persian. Anyway, on my own I made an appointment and went to see him and asked him to stay away from these people and not let them misuse his name and prestige, because they were crawling all over the hill.

But, as I said, Capitol Hill is an exciting place, there's a lot of activity up there, a lot of intellectual activity, a lot of back and forth. I won't say that that's entirely different from the State Department but one might make that conclusion.

Q: All right, you graduate

LIMBERT: We had our formal graduation in May or June of 1998.

Q: And whither John Limbert?

LIMBERT: Well, at that time, I was going through the nomination process to be U.S. ambassador to Sudan. As you know, that's a lengthy process, any ambassadorial nomination. That had started, I remember getting the first call, I think it was December of 1997 that the process started. So I had done all the various paperwork, sent it in. My name had gone to the White House, and the White House had agreed. Then they had sent my name to the Sudanese government for agrï¿½ment, for approval.

The interesting thing was that our relations with Sudan at the time were thoroughly bad. They were in just about every penalty box that you could devise.

Q: Had we already missiled them?

LIMBERT: That was to come. That's what really brought the whole nomination crashing down. It brought my progress to a screeching halt. I discovered, what many people had said, that the Sudanese personally are the most delightful, cultured, attractive people in the Arab world. I had heard that from a number of people, including my predecessor. I had met with Ambassador Carney, Tim Carney, who was the ambassador out there and he was very up-beat about the assignment, which sounded strange, because everything you read and heard about Sudan was negative. This was the period when Hassan Turabi was the head ideologue and relations, as I said, were very bad. The civil war with the south was going on. We'd put in sanctions. I think it was actually a month or two after I first heard about the posting that Clinton announced a new set of sanctions against Sudan.

Q: This was over the north-south conflict?

LIMBERT: Exactly. Human rights issues and support of terrorism also came into it. And yet, no one ever said to me we shouldn't send an ambassador. That was simply not an issue. The place was too important.

The other thing we had done, I don't remember exactly when, was take Americans out of Khartoum and base them in Nairobi and in Cairo. From those two places American staff was commuting in and out of Khartoum. The embassy was operating, the embassy kept going, the Sudanese staff kept it going. the ambassador's residence, was there. Ambassador Carney and his wife had moved to Nairobi. They would fly in and fly out.

When my name went out to the Sudanese government, I don't remember exactly when that happened, the thing the Sudanese asked about was, "Well, where is this new ambassador going to live?" The Sudanese government was not happy with our arrangement.

Q: What was the reason for this very unusual setup?

LIMBERT: The reason was a security threat. Security had always been iffy inSudan, not so much from the Sudanese but from outside groups.

Q: Cleo Noel and Curt Moore.

LIMBERT: Exactly. That was back in '72, but more recently I think there had been an attack, and a communicator had been shot there. I think they discovered later that the reporting on which they based the move turned out to be fabricated, but once it was done it was done. So Ambassador Carney and the DCM and the admin officer and most people ended up in Nairobi. The consular officer ended up in Cairo and, as I said, they would commute back and forth. It was not an arrangement that we liked very much. It was certainly not an arrangement the Sudanese liked.

When my name went forward for agrï¿½ment, the question was, "Well, is he going to be resident in Khartoum, the new ambassador? If he isn't, then why don't we just accredit someone from a neighboring post, such as your ambassador in Addis or your ambassador in Nairobi?" The Sudanese were hard over about having the ambassador resident there.

So that's where things stood. As I said, I started doing my Arabic language training. I did the kind of consultations that you can do before you are announced, because the president would not announce the nomination until the country has given agrï¿½ment. Once the country gives agrï¿½ment, then the president sends the nomination to Congress and announces it. So I was not officially announced, and under those conditions you can do consultations basically within the State Department. That's about as much as you can do. So I was going around the State Department, talking to people about Sudan, reading as much as I could and what I very quickly discovered was that the issue of Sudan was an extremely emotional and contentious issue within the U.S. government.

Q: Why?

LIMBERT: Good question. Because a lot of people had invested a lot of time and a lot of emotional capital in Sudan for a very long time. There was a group of people, for example, many of them connected to either the NGO community or the AID community, with long connections to the southerners, and who made really no pretense of neutrality in the north-south conflict.

Q: Also, did the Christian element in the south play into the American fundamentalist community or not?

LIMBERT: It was part of that. If you looked at the north-south conflict as a war between Christians and Muslims, then there were those who looked at it as a holy war. But it wasn't just religious. It also played out on racial lines. You could also look at this as Arab northerners oppressing African southerners. It was a confluence of interests. I also encountered a general distrust of Muslims and a general distrust of Arabs. The people in the south, their foreign language tended to be English. The elite there was English speaking. The elite in northern Sudan, some of it was English speaking but much of it Arabic speaking as well. So I met Americans who traced their connections to Sudan, back to the southern separatist movement of the Sixties. The southerners had negotiated a truce in '72 with President Nimeiry but there were folks in our system who traced their connections to the south that far back.

Q: For somebody who is using this for research, may I refer them to the Sixties and the Biafran War in Nigeria, where are a lot of parallels. A lot of people in the United States and in Great Britain allied themselves with the Biafran side. Looking at how our government works, the glitterati in the United States and in France and England had lined themselves up, just to compare and contrast.

LIMBERT: It is interesting. In this case, it was not a glitterati phenomenon. It was much more an ideological phenomenon. Perhaps religion played into it. Perhaps race played into it. But the result was that Sudan, within the State Department and within the Washington foreign affairs establishment, was a very emotional issue. When you talked to people about Sudan, their faces got red, their teeth would clench and they would start clenching their fists. As I said, there was a lot of emotion.

Remember, the civil war had started up again, was still going on. It was at least a ten-sided struggle, because there were competing groups in the south, there were competing groups in the north, there were groups in the north that were allied with the southern rebels, there were groups in the south who were allied with Khartoum. But within the U.S., there was also a humanitarian group that thought that you had to stop the fighting, or else you'd been feeding the same people for twenty years and we would keep on feeding them indefinitely.

There were the antislavery organizations who were buying back people captured. Now, I don't know much about economics but I do know that if you're willing to pay somebody for something, that's not necessarily good reason for him to stop doing it. However, they were collecting money all over this country.

Q: That's always been the theory about paying kidnappers or paying ransom for hostages, that you just encourage the trade, as appeared in Lebanon and elsewhere.

LIMBERT: Well, as a former hostage, I have no objections to anybody paying for their release. That's perfectly okay. I suppose if I were a captured Sudanese I wouldn't object, on a personal level. But there's a very famous story from Libya. At one point, President Qadhafi organized a campaign to get rid of scorpions and he paid people by the kilo of dead scorpions. So they found they were getting thousands of thousands of scorpions. Of course, people were raising scorpions. So, I'm not sure of the efficiency of paying people.

But it came down to this. It came down to the fact that there was a group of people who were saying that what Sudan needs is just peace. That's all it needs. Establish peace, then you can do the rest. There was another group that said, "No, Sudan doesn't need just peace. It needs a JUST peace." In other words, the peace between the north and the south has to be on the right terms: to establish democracy, power sharing, a fair shake for the south and so forth and so on. From what I could see, the two points of view were irreconcilable.

Q: Was there any separatist sentiment, that there should be a South Sudan and a North Sudan? Was there any significant group advocating that?

LIMBERT: Yes, oh yes, within part of this group that had supported the south. However, the leader of the southern Sudanese, John Garang, leader of this group called the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army, the SPLA, was adamant that there should be no secession and no division. He always pushed for a united Sudan. There were people within his coalition who favored separatism but he never did. In a sense his insistence on a united Sudan kept his American allies somewhat quiescent on the subject.

Q: While you were sitting there, waiting for this, did you find you had to keep your options open or was this just something you were listening to, as far as what we should do in the Sudan? Did you come out with any feeling about what could be done?

LIMBERT: You listen, you keep an open mind, but you realize, as I said, that there are a lot of people and a lot of groups with very strong and very fixed ideas about what our policy should be. Someone told me that the Khartoum regime is the most evil regime that we have to deal with, the most evil regime in Africa, the most evil regime in the Middle East. At the same time, I knew if I went to Khartoum, that would be the government that I'm accredited to, for better or for worse.

Q: While you were doing this, did Darfur play a role at all at that time?

LIMBERT: Not yet. The issues were north-south, the issues were terrorism, the issues were human rights but Darfur had not come into it. The interesting thing was that much of the Sudanese Army was Darfurian and those were the people who were carrying on the operations against the southerners.

Q: Did Osama bin Laden hit the radar at that time?

LIMBERT: Yes, but he had left Sudan. He was not in Sudan any more.

Q: Then how did this thing play out vis-ï¿½-vis you?

LIMBERT: Slowly. What happened was this: during this spring and summer of '98 the Sudanese were not responding to our request for agrï¿½ment. The issue seemed to be where the ambassador would be resident. I knew that once I got on the ground anywhere I would spend as much time in Khartoum as I could get away with, and not ask for specific guidance as to how much time I could spend there. I would spend as much time as I needed there. I couldn't tell the Sudanese that. The Sudanese were not interested in whether it was a fifty-fifty split or a sixty-forty split or a seventy-thirty split. They wanted the U.S. ambassador on the ground.

I think it was in the spring of '98 when the Department got that close, within an eyelash of getting everybody back into Khartoum, but apparently it got scuttled at the last moment. There was some kind of internal administration dispute, which was symptomatic of what was going on. Essentially the policy was paralyzed. It was gridlock over the policy, among these different interest groups. The "a just peace" group prevented the ambassador from moving back.

So there I sit and I'm doing consultations, I'm learning about Sudan, I'm studying Arabic and then August of '98 happens, and our embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are blown up. Shortly afterwards we sent cruise missiles against a factory in Khartoum. When I learned about that I was sitting in the office of the desk officer for Sudan doing some reading and hearing the news and everyone's comment was, "Well, this is not going to do your nomination any good! If you think it was difficult before, now it's in serious trouble."

And of course the Sudanese never responded, and it was clear my chances of getting to Khartoum were pretty slim. So there I was. I fell into something that has happened to many of us, the classic bureaucratic limbo, where the State Department did not want to withdraw the nomination. It wanted to keep the nomination open, and keep the request for agrï¿½ment with the Sudanese. Of course that left me in an anomalous position. I didn't see much point in continuing to study Arabic indefinitely, although I think one of our colleagues in a similar situation continued to study language. So I became the classic hall walker and actually rather enjoyed it, because up until that time I had never had an assignment in Main State.

The first thing I did, in September of 1998, was go to the UN to be what they call an area advisor for the General Assembly session for the Africa bureau. I was very flattered, both NEA and the Africa bureau asked me to do it for them. Each one considered that I had said yes to them. I didn't say no to either of them, I simply said, "You work it out between you!" Of course, in the State Department that's asking the impossible. People don't talk to each other that way in the Department. But eventually, because my assignment was an Africa bureau assignment and Africa bureau felt it had a better claim, I went up there as the area advisor for Africa and spent three wonderful months in New York City at the U.S. Mission to the UN.

Q: What were your experiences?

LIMBERT: Fascinating. Again, a place I had never worked. At the time, Ambassador Richardson had left. I think the next representative was Ambassador Holbrooke, but he came later. So Peter Burleigh was chargï¿½. He's a superb officer. I worked at that decaying ten story building on First Avenue, right across from the UN., I worked in the political section. There were four or five of us as area advisors, some of us active duty, some retired. I remember Bill Marsh was doing Europe. There were a group of us and we were in the political section. We also worked in what was called the ECOSOC group, the Economic and Social Council.

Basically what I did was we lobby the African delegations on matters of interest to us in the General Assembly. We did not work with the Security Council. The political officers permanently assigned there did that. We would occasionally fill in as needed but those Security Council matters tended to be the hottest issues: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Congo, all of the unsolvable problems from hell. What the area advisors did was to go around, talk to the various delegations on issues that we had.

I still remember the big one was that the United States had a candidate to be on something called the Committee for Budget and Other Matters, had a very strange acronym, ACABQ. We had this very nice woman and well qualified within the mission whom we had nominated. We wanted to see her elected. Unfortunately, because this was the committee that would oversee the budget and reform, and at this time the U.S. was not paying its dues. Now I have made a lot of silly demarches in my career but this was one of the silliest, because we were asking for people's votes on the budget committee at a time when the U.S. had refused to pay its dues. Now to their credit many of the people I talked to were very polite and very courteous, said, "Yes, we'll give this all consideration and yes, we think the United States should be represented and yes this and yes that" and some of them just told me to go jump in the lake, "Come back when you're ready to talk seriously."

But we made a full court press on this thing. We did demarches in capitals, we all went to the meeting when there was the vote and of course she got, out of the eighty or ninety members who were on the committee, maybe 15 votes. It was by secret ballot. All these people who'd promised us a vote of course didn't deliver. They had just promised a vote to get us off their necks. It was a very sad business.

The other thing was that in connection with this lobbying effort the acting permrep would hold a series of lunches at his very nice residence on the fortieth floor of the Waldorf-Astoria. It's a beautiful place with a staff and they would invite groups of representatives from the various geographical areas to come and they would hold a lunch and lobby for our candidate. I can remember very well going to one of the African sessions. There were so many African members, that they did the event in two or three sections. At this particular one they did for some of the Africans the acting permrep couldn't come. He was called away to do something else but one of the other ambassadors came. She got into the lunch (late) and all she could talk about was Kosovo.

Q: Of course, of great interest to the Africans.

LIMBERT: Not only was it of no interest to the Africans but the unstated message was, "Kosovo matters. But, Congo, where perhaps a million people have died and where there are other millions of refugees in danger of starvation and murder, doesn't matter as much. But we are willing to spend time and treasure on Kosovo and not on your problems." Very unfortunate. I don't think we got a lot of votes out of that particular lunch.

Q: What was your impression of the African delegates to the UN?

LIMBERT: Pretty impressive group, for the most part. Not always the permreps. Some of the permreps were excellent. I remember the Mozambican was very impressive, as were some of the others. Some of the staffs, also, tended to be professionals. Occasionally you have a permrep who was a relative or an associate of somebody important and was not terribly effective. Many of them had a very strong absentee record. But many of the staffs were professionals and a couple of the people that I met there, from the Mauritanian delegation for example, I later worked with when I was in Nouakchott. The Africans obviously had limited resources, and not a lot of leverage beyond their vote in the General Assembly and maybe their vote as a non-permanent member of the Security Council. But otherwise, it was a place where they had great difficulty getting anyone to listen to them. They were happy that somebody was willing to talk to them and listen to them.

Q: Did you get any feel for the UN staff itself, for the UN apparatus?

LIMBERT: I didn't have much to do with them. I know it comes in for a lot of criticism. I found it about as good or as bad as any other bureaucracy. I found it a place where there was a small group of people who were extremely good and extremely competent and then a lot of others.

Q: How seriously was the Clinton Administration playing the UN? Albright was our Secretary of State at the time, so she had come from there.

LIMBERT: I think the problem was the relations with Congress, particularly with Jesse Helms.

Q: He was the one who was withholding funds?

LIMBERT: He and also, I think, Chris Smith, on the House side, were withholding funds, which made our work up there a little bit difficult.

Q: There you were, not paying your dues.

LIMBERT: That's right. It didn't make our demarches very convincing. Again, this is what we do as professionals. Sometimes you've got a bad case.

Q: Going back to Sudan, could you explain what the missile business was about?

LIMBERT: Well, what had happened was this: our embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were attacked on the eighth of August 1998. The subsequent intelligence indicated that a factory located outside of Khartoum, I think it's called the al-Shifa factory, was involved in manufacturing nerve gas in some way. That intelligence has been disputed. There was a long article by Sy Hersh, in October '98 in the New Yorker magazine which cast doubt on it. But on the basis of that intelligence we did cruise missile strikes against the factory. I think two or three Sudanese watchmen there were killed. The British ambassador at the time, who was resident, sent a message saying, "Good shooting, wrong target." But until today I think the issue remains in dispute.

At the same time, remember, we sent cruise missiles against a training camp in eastern Afghanistan. The sense was we had to respond.

Q: I interviewed somebody who was saying that our missile in Afghanistan, our missile attack, they had postponed it for almost bureaucratically, public relations things or something, by that time all the people who were important had left the camp. We had planned, sort of a nasty thing, to hit it at time for prayers, which is, everybody is ready to go to heaven or whatever it is, but it was postponed and I think for bureaucratic reasons and of course this meant that it wasn't effective.

LIMBERT: It's very possible. This whole issue has gotten very politicized. There was a Front Line television program on this which I thought was heavily politicized. It criticized the Clinton Administration for an ineffective or delayed response. The problem was, how do you know? What target do you hit?

Q: Don't stand there, do something!

LIMBERT: So this was New York. Again, it was a very interesting and novel way to spend that three months.

Q: Wife come up with you or not?

LIMBERT: She would come up occasionally. She had her own Civil Service job at the time. So I would go back to Washington on weekends. Occasionally she could get away, she would come up for a weekend.

Q: New York's an expensive place to live. How'd you work that?

LIMBERT: Well, you're on an extended TDY. So I had a nice furnished apartment on East 52nd Street, which was something I couldn't have afforded in my dreams otherwise. But for the staff it was very difficult. Again, these were the days of bashing the Foreign Service and bashing the State Department. That's forever with us, but it was pretty bad then and housing allowances had been cut for part of the staff. Part of the staff received a housing allowance which would allow them to live in that very expensive part of Manhattan near the UN, on the East Side. You'd live in a fairly small apartment, but by New York standards it was upper middle class. There were others, however, who did not get housing. The only people I think who could afford to go without the allowance were native New Yorkers who already had housing available or could live with family. There was one officer whose wife was a model and of course New York for her was deal. I remember they had an apartment with a spectacular view of the Empire State Building. But in general for the staff that was there, particularly in the political section, it was a tough, tough assignment.

Q: Okay, UN's over, what happens?

LIMBERT: Come back to Washington in December. The General Assembly ends before Christmas.

Q: This was December of

LIMBERT: '98. Things are not moving with the Sudan assignment. The Department is beginning to talk about pulling the nomination, but in the meantime I have to find something to do. Since I did belong to the Africa bureau, I spent a couple of months working in the Office of Southern African Affairs, helping them with a conference, for something called SADC, the Southern African Regional Development Council, the southern equivalent of ECOWAS, the western African regional group. I enjoyed doing that. It wasn't terribly challenging but, again, it kept me engaged. I did that for a couple of months.

But then, frankly, I was at loose ends. There was no prospect of going to Sudan. I couldn't bid on a long term assignment. So I started to talking to friends about using my Iranian experience in some way. Iran was not a high priority at the time in the Department, but it seemed to me they needed someone to look at it. I talked to some friends in INR, I said, "I can help if you want someone to help with your Iran analysis, to look at things Iranian." They said, "Sure, we could do that."

But while that was going on, I then got a call from Ambassador Mike Sheehan, who was the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, saying, "Would you come and work for me in the counterterrorism office as one of my deputies?" I think I had bid on that job long before and didn't get it. So I went over there, starting around May or June of 1999.

Q: How long did you work for them?

LIMBERT: I worked for them through 2000, until I left for Mauritania. And then the Department started talking about another assignment.

Q: Let's talk about counterterrorism, then. What did this office do, at that time?

LIMBERT: I neglected to mention one thing. Although I certainly enjoyed my time in New York and the other area advisors I think also enjoyed their time in New York, for the permanent staff serving there, the political section had to be probably one of the most dysfunctional places that I have ever worked in my Foreign Service career.

Q: John, what were you dealing with in 1999?

LIMBERT: I was dealing with walking the halls. My assignment as ambassador to Sudan was held up, and the Department didn't want to withdraw the assignment. So I was in a bureaucratic limbo. I spent three months at the UN as an area advisor during the General Assembly in the fall of '98 and then worked a little bit in the Office of Southern African Affairs. And then in about May of '99 I had had a call from Mike Sheehan, who was the ambassador for counterterrorism in the Department, asking if I would come and be one of his deputies, to do the outreach part of the job. There's a deputy for operations and then there's a deputy who does public affairs and the outreach and also liaison with some of our military colleagues and he asked if I would do that. I was very grateful, because it gave me a home, when I didn't have one in the Department.

Q: 1999, what constituted terrorism then?

LIMBERT: This was after Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, which came, at least for the Foreign Service, as a tremendous shock, because what it meant was that the previous criteria by which we judged the safety of a post, our vulnerability to terrorism, became meaningless. Now in a place like Nairobi, for example, we hadn't worried much about terrorism. The issues were more crime related, which was serious. In Dar es Salaam, I don't think we worried about either very much. These were considered pretty safe. Neither, from the point of view of terrorism, were high threat. I remember when Ambassador Bushnell had tried to get support to improve the security at Nairobi, she didn't get a very welcome reception from the Department.

Q: I interviewed her and she lays this on the line.

LIMBERT: I'm sure she does. I don't have any inside information on this, but I'm sure she does and by all accounts she was very specific as to what was needed and didn't get much support from the Department. Nairobi was a high crime post but not a high terrorism threat. I don't think Dar es Salaam was either.

What those events meant was that we were now vulnerable just about anywhere and it brought new meaning to the phrase "soft target." Essentially Americans were fair game and if an embassy in the Middle East, which we thought previously had been vulnerable and had been attacked, was a difficult target for our enemies, then they would go after some other place.

Another thing was the indiscriminate nature of the attack. By far the great majority of the victims were Kenyans or Tanzanians. The number of American victims was relatively small.

The other issue, this was when bin Laden and his organization really came to our attention and how would we deal with it? Another issue was state sponsors of terrorism. We had a list of state sponsors. There were seven countries on that list: Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Sudan, Syria, Libya, and Cuba.

Afghanistan was not a state sponsor, because in a sense there was no government there. There was a movement to designate Afghanistan as a state sponsor, but there was no state and the idea was at least to engage the Taliban in the hope that they would cooperate enough to deliver bin Laden to us. I can remember Mike Sheehan met numerous times with the Taliban representative in New York and found him at least receptive. But the arguments were getting nowhere. Essentially, they kept coming back and saying, "We need more evidence, we need more this, we need more that" and it was very clear that it didn't matter how much evidence we presented, they were not going to respond.

What we probably didn't realize or didn't comprehend was the extent to which al Qaeda, that is the bin Laden organization, and the Taliban were in each other's' pockets and essentially al Qaeda and bin Laden had formed a state within a state inside of Afghanistan. They supplied money and fighters to the Taliban, who were engaged in their own battles with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, and thus were able to operate as an almost independent entity. The Taliban allowed them to do so.

We talked a lot in those days, Stu, about "draining the swamp." That was the phrase that we used a lot. We said "We want to drain the swamp in which the terrorists operate." At least in the case of Afghanistan, we pointed to Afghanistan as the biggest swamp. I don't think we realized how big or how deep it was.

Q: Now what were you doing, as the outreach program?

LIMBERT: I was talking to groups, whether at universities, whether at think tanks. I was at conferences. I traveled to the G-8 meetings, talked with other states. And the idea was to see what we could harmonize in our policies. It was clear from what had happened so far that the terrorists were operating across boundaries, multinationally, moving people around, moving money around, moving goods around and that the only way to go at them was to work with friends and maybe some who were not necessarily our friends but who shared an interest and an opposition to these extremist groups.

Q: Talk about shared interests, I would think countries like Syria, it's all very well to sponsor terrorism, but this sort of thing can come back and bite you. If you're encouraging people to go blow themselves up in order to be martyrs, they can easily turn on you.

LIMBERT: They had: in Hamah in 1982. The Syrians knew this, but countries made arrangements that they had to. In the case of the Syrians, they dealt ruthlessly with their own domestic Sunni extremists. Remember, the ruling group in Syria were Alawites, an offshoot of Shiism and they found themselves in a marriage of convenience with the Iranians. They seemed happy to allow the Iranians to use Syria and Beirut airport as a staging point or transit point to supply their friends in Lebanon, and Syria was not going to interfere with that. I think the calculation was that could happen without having a lot of domestic repercussions.

What stuck in the Syrians' craw, what bothered the Syrians the most, was being on our state sponsors' list. It was and is a fairly blunt instrument, in the sense that the criteria for getting the list may be pretty clear but the criteria for getting off of it are murky in the extreme.

Q: As you were going around, a major focus, I assume, would be on Europe, which would include Russia and all that. At that time were some of your interlocutors saying, "This is your problem, not our problem" or

LIMBERT: No. You didn't hear that. People knew it was a problem. People were not sure how to deal with it or the extent of it. Obviously after 9/11 and subsequent events people knew it was more of a problem than they had previously realized. I went to a conference in Germany, an experts' level conference of G-8 people and for the Germans this was as much a social issue as it was a political one, because of the nature of their society.

Q: They'd had the Baader-Meinhof gang and some of these extremist groups doing nasty things and I suppose that made them a little more sensitive to the problem.

LIMBERT: But they had a large Muslim population not of German origin, either Turkish or North African or South Asian, and they didn't know quite how to deal with them. The idea of diversity and multiculturalism was still highly debatable in Germany.

Q: France's still got a major problem.

LIMBERT: And France as well.

Q: Well, in this outreach, what were we trying to get them to do?

LIMBERT: Basically to help us get at terrorist acts. The question of root causes, the question of grievances, the theological questions were, frankly, not of interest to us. We saw these people as criminals, their acts as criminal, and we were going to deal with them as criminals. We talked about dealing with terrorists through diplomatic, military, intelligence and law enforcement means. When people said to us, "Well, if you would fix your Middle East policy you wouldn't have terrorism" our response was "These two things are not related. Our Middle East policy is what it is. These are criminal acts. Our Middle East policy does not justify someone's blowing up two hundred innocent Kenyans, for example, in Nairobi."

Q: Were we seeing this as really connected to policy, or was this sort of essentially a religious manifestation? In other words, as an excuse for people to go blow themselves up, be martyrs?

LIMBERT: At that point I don't think we saw it as religious. We saw it as criminal. There was a famous poster at the time that shows the ruins of Nairobi and says, "This is not politics! This is murder!" Within the administration you had an effort to look at the religious dimension and this was tricky. It's always tricky when you start dealing with religion. But the point we were making was that whoever was killing us or trying to kill us was doing it under the rubric of religion and you deny that at your peril. To say that this has nothing to do with religion is foolish, because the people who are doing it believe that it does.

Q: Were we taking a look at Islam and its various manifestations?

LIMBERT: Not to the extent we do today. There were some efforts, but frankly some of the efforts that I saw within the Department and within the government were a bit naive, in the sense they were kind of at the level of "Let's all love each other! We are all brothers under the skin and we all worship the same God" and so forth and so on. That is fine but clearly there were groups of people out there who didn't want to convince us of anything, who only wanted to kill us and they were not interested in whether we were brothers under the skin.

Q: Were we projecting our sort of religious outlook onto a fringe outlook of another group, just like you might equate these politicized Muslim fundamentalists to bible-thumping Christians?

LIMBERT: The campaign or the war or the crusade or whatever you want to call it is not against Islam, although sometimes you had a difficult time convincing audiences this was so. On the other hand, you couldn't deny that there was a connection. I wouldn't go in front of an audience and deny it. Again, part of our efforts and this was a long-term battle, was to make sure that whatever our message was, it gave our audience credit for intelligence and didn't patronize our audience or didn't treat them as though they were stupid.

Q: How about dealing with the military? First place, had the attack on the Cole taken place?

LIMBERT: It was later.

Q: The military, how did they take this, because this was sort of an amorphous police type action unless you have sort of troops on the ground?

LIMBERT: The military was certainly part of what we did. Again, you said, "Okay, what tools do we have, what means to we have to deal with these extremists?" The military was one of them, but it was only one. We've all seen the limits of military force, what it can and cannot do in the battle against terrorists. I think the military itself is well aware of this. Someone has to go in and negotiate agreements with host countries. Someone has to go in and persuade host countries to look at what's being said in mosques or schools or what's being taught to a younger generation or what's going out over the media to young people. Someone has to do that. Part of this is law enforcement, as I said, part of it is intelligence and the military doesn't do all of those things and makes no pretense to do all of those things.

Q: Were we looking, at the time, at the madrassas, the Wahhabi influence on schools sponsored by Saudi Arabia in many place, extreme Islamic outlook, television broadcasts, was this part of our

LIMBERT: At that point it was not. Most of that came after 9/11. What we did, was see what we could with the Taliban. We were looking at economic measures, diplomatic measures, to isolate them, just to get the message across that their support and cooperation with the terrorists was going to have a price. We ran into a very interesting phenomenon when we found that the Saudis were supporting them. Saudi Arabia was one of the few states that had relations with Taliban. The UAE similarly had a relationship and that was even harder to figure out.

Q: The United Arab Emirates don't have that Wahhabi overlay.

LIMBERT: No. It was hard to understand, unless there was a commercial tie. But, for whatever reason in the Saudi case it was hard for a lot of people to understand. It seemed to be that for the Saudis the important thing about the Taliban, whatever else they were and whatever else they did, they were anti-Shia and militantly so. For the Saudis that matters and it matters a lot. I used to say that the Saudis are still fighting the Battle of Siffin in 660, these early battles of the seventh century.

Q: This was Ali and

LIMBERT: This was Ali and Muawiyah. That's yesterdays' news out there and the militant anti-Shiism of the Taliban, going against the Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan, and their actions to keep out the Iranians, for the Saudis excused just about anything else that the Taliban did. So even though the Taliban were harboring bin Laden, whose mantra was to overthrow the al-Sauds, that didn't seem to bother the Saudis so much, or at least that militant anti-Shiism seemed to excuse it.

Q: Did you sense at that time something that became very apparent later on, the fact that the CIA, the State Department, the Pentagon and the Department of Justice, particularly the FBI, really weren't sharing the same hymnbook? This was a post-9/11 assessment and this was a significant criticism, that information about this was not being shared equally around.

LIMBERT: There are really two issues here. One is the sharing of information. You and I have worked in this system long enough to know that's just a fact of bureaucratic life. Organizations do not like to share information with other organizations and they find all kinds of reasons not to do so. Computer systems are incompatible. One group does not accept the clearances of another. The excuses go on and on and on.

The second part of it, though, and this is maybe harder to overcome, is that these organizations that you mention all have different cultures and different aims. The FBI, for example, does outstanding forensic work. I talked to one of their people who was part of the investigation of the 1998 Dar es Salaam embassy bombing and she described how they worked with the Tanzanian police to find that little shred of evidence that gave them the VIN number for the truck that was carrying the explosives. They were able to track that number back through the local (non-computerized) system. That's what they do and they do that very well. But the FBI's reason for being is to gather evidence and to convict the criminals. That's not the CIA's purpose, it's not the State Department's purpose, it's not the military's purpose. So people are going to be working at cross purposes. This is very difficult to get under control.

In theory, the State Department's Coordinator for Counterterrorism is supposed to work through these issues, but that's very difficult. I can remember going to meetings at the White House with Richard Clarke, who was then the White House coordinator. I could see the frustration in his face as he attempted to get these bureaucracies to talk to each other.

Q: The office is a new office, but how did you find cooperation within the Department and all that?

LIMBERT: It varied up and down the corridors. We worked with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. I can't remember any special problem there. We worked with Consular Affairs. Mary Ryan, may she rest in peace, was the assistant secretary then. That was very good.

With the regional bureaus, it varied a lot. We all know that the regional bureaus are supposed to be the traditional centers of power in the department. NEA was probably the most difficult. I can remember Ambassador Sheehan at one point being frustrated by NEA's reluctance to do pretty much anything. He then said, "Someone should make a banner, hang it across the NEA front office and the banner should read 'Now is Not the Time!'" because just about anything you wanted to do, that's what NEA would tell you.

Q: As soon as you've got peace between the Israelis and Arabs, then you could, which is right around the corner

LIMBERT: Exactly, because basically anything you do that region is going to upset somebody.

With the Africa bureau we didn't have the same problem. We had some big issues in Africa: Sudan, for example. Of course, Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. But I think the relationship worked better there.

Q: Well when did you leave this job?

LIMBERT: Well, I went there in May of '99. In late July of '99 I first learned of being named ambassador again. They finally pulled my nomination for Sudan, and then I learned I had been named by the D Committee for Mauritania. Now, as you know, from that time until you actually get there is a very long process. In fact it went from July of '99 to November of 2000. That's by no means the record.

That was July. I continued to work in counterterrorism roughly until the spring of 2000. I did some very interesting things there. For example, I led an interagency team which deployed to Ramstein Air Base that was to respond if there were emergencies resulting from Y2K.

Q: You might explain what the Y2K

LIMBERT: There was a question about whether, with the turn of the millennium, our technologically based society would grind to a halt and all of our computers and all of our data processors and all of our banks and all of our airlines and our air traffic control systems and our railroads worldwide would grind to a halt, because the system could not recognize "00" and would think they were back in 1900. So among other things there was a huge bureaucracy within the government to deal with the issue of Y2K, the year 2000 As part of that effort I led a team on New Years Eve, of about 30 people from various agencies of the U.S. government to Ramstein, Germany, if there was an emergency somewhere. My question was, "If the world ends, what do we do?" So I was there through that winter

Q: I think we were telling people "Don't fly on Russian airlines" and all sorts of things.

LIMBERT: I can remember that night, we had an operations room there and as it went from Australia and worked its way west hour after hour everything seemed to go very smoothly. If it hadn't, I don't know what we would have done

Q: It's nice to know you that were ready to save us!

LIMBERT: Exactly. What this team of 25 or 30 people would have done I'm not sure.

Q: You would say "Why don't we do this?" and that would take care of it.

LIMBERT: Exactly but there we were. In the fall of 1999 I went on a deployment with a team for an antiterrorist exercise to Amman, Jordan. Again, I led that team. We had an emergency response team. It had attempted to deploy in 1998, in the case of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and the experience was a disastrous one. It got as far as Spain, and their aircraft broke down. The team had an old 707 that belonged in the Smithsonian, and the damned thing was always breaking down. Anyway, it broke down in Spain and the team sat on the ground there while this disaster was going on in East Africa.

Starting from the late summer and fall of '99, I was in the process that leads to being an ambassador and learning all the protocol that goes with it.

Q: You were in Mauritania from when to when?

LIMBERT: I got there in November of 2000 and left in August of 2003.

Q: Let's take a look at the protocol that you have to go through to be an ambassador.

LIMBERT: That has to be seen to be believed. What happens is this: the Department convenes something it calls the D Committee, named for the deputy secretary of state. It draws up a list of posts that are available to career employees; it has a list of post that at least the Department believes the White House is willing to fill with career personnel. It has a list of people who have been recommended by the various regional bureaus and other parts of the Department. It is not a process known for its transparency, by the way. AFSA has nothing to do with negotiating this process.

Q: The American Foreign Service Association, essentially the Foreign Service's union.

LIMBERT: Which did negotiate a lot of the assignment process for positions other than chief of mission. Anyway, the process matches career officers' names with posts, and sends that list of names to the White House. If the White House agrees, then the process goes forward. Then you start taking a series of what are called "virginity tests," where you make out long forms about possible conflicts of interest or issues that may disqualify you or may complicate the confirmation process. You send those to the White House. This was in the fall and winter of '99 and 2000. It was interesting because the White House had recently been embarrassed by what had happened with their ambassador to Switzerland.

Q: He was even buried as a veteran at Arlington Cemetery. It turns out he wasn't a veteran.

LIMBERT: No, he had claimed that he had been in the Merchant Marine in World War II and his ship had been attacked on the Murmansk run. Well, one of his ex-wives gave him away after he died. He died in office, while he was in Switzerland. According to his wishes, he was buried in Arlington Cemetery and then one of his ex-wives, of whom I understand there were many, gave him away. She blew the whistle, said, "No, he'd never done this. This was all made up." It turned out he had not been in the Merchant Marine. Well, as a result they dug him up and reburied him at the Coronado Hotel in San Diego, which I think he had owned. I think the Capitol Steps did a song about him called "We Had to Rebury Larry."

But clearly the White House did not want a repeat of this fiasco, so they were very interested in things like this. A very nice young lawyer from their office called me and we went over the questionnaire. Finally she said, "Is there anything not in there that could embarrass the administration?" And I said, "Really I think I've led a rather straightforward life." She said, "That's what we like."

So once that happens, then the White House says, "Okay, we don't see any problem. It's now okay to send the name out to the prospective host country for agrï¿½ment," meaning the U.S. government proposes sending John Smith to country X as ambassador. The host country then has the option of saying yes or no. That was where, in 1998, my nomination to Sudan got caught. It went through all of the other phases, but when it got to Khartoum it got stuck. They didn't respond.

When my name went out to the Mauritanians, I don't remember exactly when the agrï¿½ment came back, I think it was in February or March of 2000. Only at that point is the nomination publicly announced and the president announces that he is sending this nomination to the Senate.

At each stage of this there is a protocol as to whom you may and may not talk to. Until your nomination is announced you can talk only to people within the State Department, and you restrict your consultations to those within the Department of State. Once your nomination is announced, but until you're confirmed, you can do a wider swath. They one thing they told us never, ever do, under any circumstances, until you're confirmed is go and talk to anyone in the House of Representatives, because the Senate is very jealous of its prerogative to confirm ambassadors. They said, "If you want to talk to the North Koreans or the Iranians, that might be okay but don't go and talk to the House of Representatives."

Q: Did you have any problem with confirmation?

LIMBERT: Actually, I didn't. It was a long process.

In the spring of 2000 I cut back my hours at counterterrorism and started pursuing refresher language. I did both Arabic and French.

That was not a good year to be nominated as ambassador, however. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under the chairmanship of Senator Helms, was on the warpath. Remember, this was also the period of the missing laptop and the man in the tweed coat stealing the secrets.

Among the trophies they liked to put the heads of ambassadors designate on their wall. There were four of us going to Arabic speaking countries and we were doing refresher Arabic at FSI. Of the four, I was the only one who got through that year. There were two, one going to Yemen, one going to Kuwait, who never made it, and one going to Bahrain who made it with a year's delay.

Q: Looking back on it, what were the problems?

LIMBERT: Again, there was kind of a frenzy that swept the committee. I guess they smelled blood at this point. These were tough days, particularly in that area.

But as I said, I did get through. It was a long process. I didn't get confirmed until almost the end of September 2000. I was sworn in in October. We flew out of Boston on the evening of Election Day, November 2000. When we arrived in Germany the next morning we still didn't know who was elected. We had about two weeks of consultations in Europe. When I got to Nouakchott the 17th of November still didn't know who was president-elect.

Q: When you gave testimony before the Senate committee, were there any particular questions or anything?

LIMBERT: No, it was a "wham, bam, thank you, ma'am" operation. There were eight of us nominated for Africa, and they group these hearings geographically. They had told us to do brief prepared statements, which we had done. Then, when it came my turn, they first of all said, "Can you abbreviate your prepared statement?" which was already about three minutes long, so I cut it down to about a minute and a half and then after about thirty seconds they said, "Thank you very much, just submit the rest for the record." I got a question about democracy in Mauritania. There was some discussion of AIDS in some of the southern African countries. Nothing untoward or unexpected happened there. One of the people at the hearing, I believe, did have some problems getting confirmed, but it had nothing to do with what happened at the hearings. These problems were related to something else.

Q: What were American interests in Mauritania?

LIMBERT: Limited, at that point. During my consultations I ran into a lot of not well informed people. There were not a lot of people who knew much about Mauritania. I can remember going to one office and being told, "Oh, you will really like Port Louis." I said, "Well, I'm sure I would like Port Louis if I were going to Mauritius, but I'm not going to Mauritius, I'm going to Mauritania." Going to one other place, my interlocutor said, "I don't really know much about Mauritania. I went to the frontier once. I got to the Sï¿½nï¿½gal River and I looked across." That seemed to be about the limit of it.

I asked someone about AIDS in Mauritania and the response was, "Well, we think it's there but we don't know much about it." And that was kind of the response that I would get. Remember, this was the end of the time when the Foreign Service and our diplomatic efforts had taken a real financial hit and personnel hit, In the Nineties a lot of smaller posts were pretty well hung out to dry. They were not supported well and I had that sense that that was what I was getting into. People I met who had been there and had served there were very enthusiastic about the place. People liked it and had found it interesting, but there were some black holes in terms of what people knew about it.

Q: Had Mauritania crossed your radar when you were on the counterterrorism beat?

LIMBERT: Not really, only the fact that one of the senior al Qaeda figures is a man named Abu Hafs al-Mauritania. Abu Hafs is the Arabic nickname for Omar. There was a Mauritanian connection to the Los Angeles airport bombing plot. You remember Ahmed Ressam, who was captured at the border in Washington state? They did trace a Mauritanian connection there, but at that point it did not figure large. In the post-9/11 world all that changed, but it was not one of those posts or countries that was a household word, which was fine for me. In my service, that's the kind of place that I've enjoyed more.

Q: Talk a bit about when you went out. What was the situation of Mauritania?

LIMBERT: Historically, our relations had not been very good. Mauritania had a very iffy human rights record. It had a history of military coups. It had supported the wrong side in the first Gulf War.

To go back to my time in counterterrorism, there was a very interesting thing that happened while I was there. We used to meet regularly in a group to talk about the problem of terrorist groups using NGO's as cover and as funding. What set this off was the Turkish earthquake, I think in 2000. When that happened the U.S. government sent around a list of organizations, saying that if you're interested in contributing and helping the victims of the earthquake, here are some charitable organizations that you might consider contributing to. I don't remember the exact name, but it was something called the Islamic African Relief Society. Well it turned out that that organization was a front for the National Islamic Front, which is the ruling party of Sudan, which was of course one of the countries on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. So there you have the U.S. government essentially putting its stamp of approval on this organization and saying, "Yes, if you want to give money to help people in Turkey, here's an organization to do it."

So we looked into this a little bit and saw that this one particular incident was a symptom of a larger problem. As is customary in the government, we formed a working group with people from various organizations and we met about once three weeks at the State Department to talk about this issue. The work of this group continued and at one point, it might have been March or April of 2000, there was a G-8 experts' meeting in Germany and at one session our Russian colleague, who had not said much during the meeting, came up to me and gave me some papers without much explanation and said, "I think you might be interested in this." And I looked at them and I could tell these were the names of some organizations with Islamic affiliations. I took them back and I gave them to the State Department. It turned out what these were names of Islamic NGO's operating in Central Asia. They were organizations the Russians were suspicious about. The subject had come up peripherally in this conference but the Russians of course had other sources of information: they were bugging the conference room that our working group was using.

We found out later that the Russians had planted bugs in a conference room in the State Department. Bureaucratically it belonged to the Bureau of Oceans, Environmental and Scientific Affairs. Nobody could figure out why they would bug this room. Very professionally they hid microphones behind the chair rails and then replaced the molding. So we were holding our meetings in there. What we were talking about wasn't super sensitive but it was classified. Much to our surprise, this scandal broke in Washington the spring or summer of 2000 and it became very clear what the Russians were up to when they very generously provided information on Islamic charities in Central Asia.

Q: I talked to somebody, a security person, who drew me a little sketch and he said, "If you had a sketch of which conference room it was, if you somehow had turned it the other side up you'd end up in a much better target room and the guy who did it did a wonderful job of bugging the place but got the wrong conference room. But they did find two Russian agents sitting in a car a block or two away happily recording stuff. I think we kicked them out of the country.

LIMBERT: That's right. Well some of it was obviously this meeting of our working group, so they figured out these were things we'd be interested in.

Q: Back to Mauritania, you said we had the Peace Corps and AID, in other words, trying to be nice to Mauritania and they didn't like us.

LIMBERT: Our relations, going back to the Eighties and Nineties, were not very good. Mauritania had this iffy human rights record, it supported the wrong side in the first Gulf War. It had this reputation as being a place where slavery was still practiced. It had a history of military coups. Democracy was pretty rudimentary; "nascent" was the word that they used.

The mission when I got there was a shell of what it had been. At one time we had had a pretty good sized mission there. We had an AID mission, we had a marine guard contingent. It had been much better staffed than it was when I got there in November 2000, but all of the cuts that happened through the Nineties had hit Nouakchott very hard. So we had the embassy in this compound that we rattled around in. There weren't a lot of people there. You had five or six direct hire Americans at the embassy, then Peace Corps another three or four direct hire Americans over there and something like two hundred Foreign Service nationals.

Q: Had there been any consideration to saying, "We don't need to be here"?

LIMBERT: That had been our view. I think that argument had gone on back in the mid-Nineties, when the whole question about universality had been rehashed. And where we came out was yes, we want universality. There were a few exceptions. We did close our embassy in the Seychelles. I believe we had a small embassy in the Comoros we closed. And we closed Equatorial Guinea, Malabo. You could argue these one way or the other. The Seychelles was a very pleasant place. It's too bad it was closed. Malabo we have already reopened. It's important because it was discovered to have oil later on. But in general we kept posts open. We didn't close a lot of posts, but we didn't support them and we let them starve for resources.

So when I got there, in terms of staff and physical facilities, we'd been cut below critical mass, essentially and left to shift for ourselves.

Q: What do you do?

LIMBERT: You do the best you can under those circumstances. One thing you do, with the staff and the resources that you have and the attention span that you might get in Washington, you perform a brutal triage on issues. In my experience the Foreign Service is not really good at that. We think everything is important. But in this case we had no choice and we simply said, okay, what are three things that are important for us to do? One was humanitarian assistance. One was democracy and human rights. And the other was maintaining Mauritania's moderate position vis-ï¿½-vis the Middle East. Mauritania had become the third Arab country to recognize Israel, in 1999. That was obviously something we wanted to support and maintain.

And that was it. If it didn't come into any of those areas, we just didn't do it. It required a degree of discipline among ourselves to make this work, but I think at the end of the day we all benefited from it.

Q: This is often the case. Were you getting the usual demands, "all posts should report on palm tree production" or something like that?

LIMBERT: Now the Foreign Service made an attempt in the Nineties to get an handle on that by something called the Special Embassy Program. There were about forty or fifty of these. They set a ceiling and they said, "If your direct hire American staff is less than 25 or 35, you fall into this Special Embassy Program and if you're in the Special Embassy Program then you should not have all of these superfluous reporting requirements" such as "What is Mauritania doing about polar bear protection?" or "What is Mauritania doing about the Antarctic?" There was a special office in the State Department that if you wanted to send one of these things out you had to go through it to get permission. It just never worked. The requests still kept coming.

Q: Stuff kept coming. Did you just file it away and forget it?

LIMBERT: Basically, yes. There are two philosophies on this. Some of my colleagues would get quite vociferous, and they would nag at the Department and say, "Look, we told you once, we told you a thousand times, don't send us these things." My own philosophy was that the Department didn't need me to tell it how screwed it was. It already knew that. So simply file and forget was I thought a wiser course.

Q: Let's talk about the Peace Corps. What were they up to and why did we have the Peace Corps there?

LIMBERT: Peace Corps was never intended to be a development agency. It was for cultural and humanitarian exchange. Mauritania was one of the most difficult Peace Corps countries that there was. The volunteers did good work. They did teaching, some of them were English teachers, some of them did health, agricultural work. They were needed. They did a lot of small projects out in villages: wells, gardens. I had nothing but admiration for the people who did this. Most of them young people, a few of them were older. Most of them were people in their twenties and they had to learn some very tough languages. They had to learn Hassaniyya Arabic or Pulaar, in addition to French, go out and live under some very austere conditions in very remote places. I used to visit them as much as I could. My wife would always make sure we had chocolate to take to them, brownies and cookies, chocolate chip cookies, which were most welcome. Usually when I went out there the local governor or prï¿½fet would host me and my entourage to lunch and invite the Peace Corps volunteer. Since these people weren't usually eating very well, that meal was most welcome.

So I took an interest. Part of it was personal, I'd been a volunteer myself at one time and also I thought what they were doing was important. The other thing I did was encourage them to think about the Foreign Service as a career, because once they had done what they had done, and served out your two years in some small Mauritanian town, there wasn't much the Foreign Service could throw at you that would come as a shock or surprise.

Q: It's often been said the Peace Corps is better for the volunteers than for the people they're serving. I'm not putting pejorative terms, I'm just saying that Peace Corps people do their thing and then when they leave, unless somebody else does it, the place goes back to where it had before. How did you find this in Mauritania?

LIMBERT: That's one of the goals of the Peace Corps. It's aimed at increasing Americans' understanding of the world. That's an accomplishment of the Peace Corps. Again, it goes back to this issue: is Peace Corps a development agency? It is not, and does not have the resources to be one. These are not trained development officers. AID people are trained development officers and what they do is presumably within a development strategy. So when they build a road here or have a training program there, it in some way contributes to the economic development of the country. It may or may not, but at least philosophically that's what it's supposed to do. Peace Corps doesn't do that. Peace Corps, basically does small projects, humanitarian assistance. It does direct teaching, some technical assistance, but it shouldn't pretend to be doing development work, because that's not what it does.

Q: How about AID? What was AID doing?

LIMBERT: AID wasn't there. AID had pulled out of Mauritania in the mid-Nineties. It had been there in a pretty big way, considering how small a population Mauritania had. AID had pulled out of there, just like they had pulled out of a number of African countries. There was an AID office in Senegal, in Dakar. There was an AID office in Bamako. From those offices they were doing some projects in Mauritania. The best project was HIV/AIDS education, where they worked with religious teachers, to teach about HIV/AIDS in the mosques and the religious schools. It was quite an innovative program. Not big, not expensive but very effective. And people would come up from Dakar quite often, and people would come from Bamako every so often and I made sure that when they came to Mauritania we took good care of them, because they were doing good work.

The Mauritanians wanted AID to come back and reopen. When AID was there it had trained a lot of people. A lot of the skilled Mauritanians within their own bureaucracy, had worked for AID at one time. One of the best things I think that AID does is its training of people, either directly or indirectly by hiring people from the host country as professionals. And so a lot of folks in Mauritania wanted AID to come back. But AID was not interested.

One of the things I was proudest of was to get USAID interested in doing more against HIV/AIDS in Mauritania. What I found was that AID essentially said, "Mauritania is a 'non-presence' country and therefore since it's a 'non-presence' country our policy is to do very little there." I said to them, in politer language, "That's a stupid policy. HIV/AIDS doesn't care about your presence or non-presence. It doesn't care about political boundaries. What we know about the rate of prevalence in Mauritania, which is not much, is that it's fairly low today. But it was very low in the Ivory Coast a few years ago and now it's quite high, one of the highest in the region. If we do nothing in Mauritania, I guarantee you're going to have a high rate."

USAID was not that interested in our squawking but what we did was team up with about six or seven other chiefs of mission in the region whose host countries were also 'non-presence' countries for USAID and to whom USAID also given similar back of the hand responses. USAID in the field was also very sympathetic. Its officers agreed with our point of view but had no say in the matter. We teamed up and did a combined message. I think it included Niger, Banjul, Cape Verde, some other places that were 'non-presence' countries. We said, "Look, I'm sorry, it may be your policy but it makes no sense and here's why." AID did eventually respond to that. When they heard from seven or eight chiefs of mission together, they said, "Okay, we'll see what we can do" and they started doing more.

Q: What could they do?

LIMBERT: Well, they could send people in, for example, to work with the host country anti-AIDS group. For example, when this global fund for AIDS, malaria and TB was established, each country had to submit proposals. AID helped with the proposals. They did more with AIDS education. They worked with Peace Corps. Peace Corps did a lot of anti-AIDS programs, although Peace Corps had no resources. So AID supported the Peace Corps volunteers in doing these projects. Very imaginative: music programs, drama programs. This is very simple. This may be like paying for a sound system, or helping a musical group make a tour, helping them rent a van and paying for their gasoline. These places operate at a very basic level.

Q: When you're talking about AIDS, you're talking about something that is connected directly to sex. Mauritania is an Islamic country. I would think that, Islamic country, it'd be a problem, as far as

LIMBERT: On the contrary, I was very impressed. The kind of battles that I remembered here in the United States, over condom use, for example, you didn't see there. Talking to the imams of the various mosques there, they said, "Look, we certainly are not in the business of encouraging extramarital sex, that's forbidden under Islam. But AIDS is a greater evil. Our religion tells us that if it's a choice, you have to fight the greater evil," which struck me as a very pragmatic way of going about it. No, I found no particular resistance.

Q: When you got there, how did you find dealing with the government, both in the capital and out in the provinces? How effective was it? Was there much of a worldly view or not?

LIMBERT: Probably better than some and worse than others. How do you rate it? My previous overseas post had been Guinea. It was certainly much better than that. Guinea ranks almost down with Nigeria on the kleptocracy scale. Mauritania was much better than that.

On the other hand, it is a poor country. Communication is very difficult. Many areas are very remote. There's no water. There's always a problem with drought. There's a real challenge to deliver basic services to people under those conditions.

How effective was the host government? The quality and the integrity of the people you dealt with varied a lot. Some of the governors that I dealt with were basically thugs, political cronies who'd been paid off. Others seemed to be much more effective.

The thing that probably affected me most was making trips to the countryside. I'd go out and I'd go to a small town or village. Usually there'd be some small project we would have there, a self-help project or the military, USEUCOM, supported some projects there and I would go and either inaugurate the project or check it..

Some of this was good stuff. It's hard to argue with fresh water, the country was just so dry. Or some small garden project, where people can make some money and grow vegetables, improve their diet, all these sorts of things. I liked that.

But sometimes I would get the sense, you have to remember that all of this work was fungible and we were doing work that the host government should have been doing. I'll never forget, I went to a village in the south, near the Sï¿½nï¿½gal River and went to a project where we had given a milling machine, so that people could mill their grain through a village cooperative. This was like a three thousand dollar project. We got there, the ladies were dancing. I saw more dancing ladies in my time there, and I never want to see a dancing lady again. The ladies were dancing and drums were beating and we did the ceremony. Butt then the same village, was the home of the head of the Mauritanian Senate and we went to his house. The guy had a mansion. He lived very well in this very poor village and I'm thinking to myself, "Now what the hell are we doing here? Are we just being played for suckers? Why are we doing projects in this place? There's money here. There are people with money. Why should the U.S. be doing this?"

This happened more and more. This issue came up for us, it came up for the European Union, which was doing a lot of similar things. Not only were we doing these projects but oversight and management of these projects is very labor intensive. You've got the five thousand dollar well project but to get there you have to send somebody out for three days by road just to this damned place. At one point we flew with the defense attachï¿½'s plane to a place called Bir Moghrein, which is in the far north of the country, near the border with Western Sahara. It's the last outpost before you get to Algeria. It's just the end of the world. We went up to this place and there was a well that somebody had dug but they'd hit bedrock and to get through bedrock they needed another four or five thousand dollars to do blasting and to dig. I'm a softy, and I couldn't resist. I said, "Okay, we'll help you with this thing," I got our Mauritanian employee who's responsible, he was a virtual AID officer, and I made him go all the way to Bir Moghrein to oversee this project. But we got the damned thing done.

At the same time, you have to ask yourself hard questions. You have to swallow hard and say, "Okay, we'll do these things, but realistically what are we doing?" But some of these places you'd go were just about as miserable as you could imagine. There were no services, no school, no fresh water, no health care, no roads. People got sick, they died. That's just what happened. And anybody with any energy or initiative got out as soon as possible and came to live in the slums of Nouakchott. You'd see the slums of Nouakchott and you'd say, "Why would anyone live here?" And then you'd see where they'd come from and you'd understand why.

Q: I've had people tell me, "You look at third world slums and for us it sounds awful but for many this is a transition period, these are people coming in and if they survive they're going to move out of the slums.

LIMBERT: And they can make some money as casual laborers or other things, and send money back to their families. They can migrate somewhere. I particularly remember going up along the coast, to the region between Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, where there's an aboriginal people who live there called the Imraguen, who live by fishing. That's about as miserable a place as I've ever seen. There's no fresh water. None. They have nothing to eat but fish. The whole place stinks of rotten fish. Water had to be brought over from the capital by tanker and then sold. It was just a miserable place.

Q: I'm reading an account of some American sailors in the very early 1900's who were shipwrecked there, talking about how they were made slaves a while and how they would fight to drink camel urine.

LIMBERT: There was a famous painting

Q: The Raft of the Medusa.

LIMBERT: The Raft of the Medusa, exactly, shipwreck at that same area. It's called the Banc d'Arguin, is the name of the area. It's a very famous bird sanctuary. But for the people there, it was miserable.

Q: Were there other embassies there and how did you all work with each other?

LIMBERT: There was a small diplomatic community. The European embassies were the German, the French and the Spanish. The British had only an honorary consul there. The Russians were there. The Russians had a really splendiferous place. The story was that in the 1970s the Russians had built this prefab embassy and put it on a ship to send to Santiago, Chile when the coup toppled Allende. Pinochet took power in Chile and a clever Russian ambassador in Nouakchott got it diverted to Nouakchott and they put this thing in. But God knows what the Russians did. I don't think they had much to do there. They rattled around in their embassy. They had a very experienced ambassador, who'd been ambassador to Sudan and who spoke beautiful Arabic. The Chinese were there, mostly, I think, for commercial purposes. And then many of the Arab countries were there and a couple of the African countries.

The Nigerians were there. The good thing about the Nigerians, was they were a mainstay of support for the international school with their kids. It was their tuition that kept the school going. The Nigerian ambassador had, I think, two wives and innumerable children in our school.

My favorite among the Africans was the Senegalese. The Arabs were there: the Emirates, the Saudis, the Kuwaitis, the Egyptians, the Tunisians, the Moroccans and the Algerians.

Q: A pretty substantial diplomatic corps.

LIMBERT: It was about twenty some.

Q: I would think you'd spend an awful lot of time entertaining each other or something.

LIMBERT: We did some of that. It tended to divide between the Europeans and the Arabs. I was fortunate. I could keep a foot in both camps, because I spoke Arabic and French, equally badly, but I spoke both. One of the Arab ambassadors loved to have drinking parties, in which large amounts of Scotch were consumed. I'm not a big drinker, but they liked to have me there anyway. The Arabs wonderful company, very charming. What they did, I don't know. The Saudi government had a school that they operated. Eventually, I think, after 9/11 the Mauritanians closed it down.

Q: While you were there, did sort of the curriculum of the school come under scrutiny?

LIMBERT: Yes it did. They were reluctant to do anything because it was providing free and subsidized education, but they finally got nervous about what was being preached there.

Q: Were there any American business interests there?

LIMBERT: Nothing very big. Occasionally somebody would come through. Whatever business interest there was [inaudible]. Very little trade.

Q: On the fishing side, were there problems with the Russians, the Japanese, big fishing vessels coming up and scooping up all the fish?

LIMBERT: There were, occasionally, yes. It was very difficult for the Mauritanians to control their own fishing grounds. There were problems like that. There were problems of foreign ships [inaudible] by government officials under the table, money was being exchanged. They have a fishing license policy in Mauritania which is something of a license to print money. So if you could get a license to fish commercially you didn't actually go out and fish. You brokered the license to somebody, who might broker it to somebody else who might broker it to somebody else who might eventually actually go out and fish.

Q: The foreign ministry, or whatever ministries you'd deal with, were they responsive, how'd you find them, when you were there?

LIMBERT: I dealt with the foreign ministry and the interior ministry were the two most important ones of us. On a case by case basis, some of the other ministers you might enjoy talking to. The minister of culture and religious affairs was always fun to talk to. He didn't speak any French, so I had the chance to use Arabic. The minister of commerce was not interested in talking about commerce but he was, again, very interesting to talk to, very outspoken. It was what you find in a lot of former French colonies, where the elite are extremely well educated and very analytical and very interesting to talk to and very well read. But they couldn't manage things. You invite the minister of posts and telegraphs over for lunch and he would be the most charming luncheon guest you could imagine, talk about all kinds of things. He would be analytical, well read, the best that the French educational system could offer. But then if you looked at the post office it would be absolute chaos. That was pretty much it. There were some who were very interesting to talk to, but in terms of accomplishments, there was very little initiative for getting things done.

In the case of the foreign ministry, it didn't matter so much, because they're not managing any domestic service. The foreign minister when I got there was very articulate, the person who'd been behind Mauritania's establishing relations with Israel. Unfortunately, there was a cabinet shuffle after I'd been there about two months, so he was out.

That was another feature. The Mauritanian president loved to change his cabinet, frequently and you never could figure out why somebody was changed, except that the president needed to reward another group of cronies. You'd had your turn and now it was somebody else's turn. It didn't lead to creation of a good, technocratic cadre. When I got there of course I did my duty and called on most of the ministers and then, about two months later, most of the ministers changed. My Mauritanian associates said, "Do you want to call on the new ministers?" I could have spent my whole career here doing nothing but making courtesy calls on new ministers. By the time I had finished, the whole group would have changed.

So I concentrated on about three or four. Health was another one we worked with, because of HIV/AIDS. Education we also cared about because of our Peace Corps program. But Interior was important. We started an anti-terrorist program while I was there. I had a very good regional security officer who got the program started. So we worked pretty closely with Interior.

Q: Were there any problems with neighboring states?

LIMBERT: There had been. Of course, Mauritania and Senegal, in 1990-91, had fought a border war. There had been riots against Mauritanian traders in Dakar, then there had been counter-riots against Senegalese in Mauritania. It was quite nasty. The embassy lost a lot of its trained people at that time. They were Senegalese and a lot of them were expelled.

But the two countries had come a long way. Relations had gotten better and by the time of the World Cup in 2002, when in the first round Senegal beat France and the whole city celebrated. There were occasional incidents over fishing boats, Senegalese fishing boats, would go into waters of Mauritania. But if anything happened, both sides made very sure that things didn't escalate.

Q: Did Morocco-Algeria ever ...

LIMBERT: Morocco at one time had made territorial claims. "Greater Morocco" extends all the way to the Sï¿½nï¿½gal River. Rabat delayed recognizing independent Mauritania, for a long time.

Mauritania got its nose bloodied, particularly when they divided the Western Sahara with the Moroccans. They Polisario turned against Mauritania and they even shelled the capital. So Mauritania wisely pulled out, and renounced any claim to the Western Sahara.

Mauritania did not take any position on the Western Sahara after it withdrew, so it tried to keep good relations with both Algeria and Morocco. It got a lot of refined oil from Algeria.

They used to talk about the "Tunisian model," a country without a lot of resources but could develop itself through educating the population. They had a long way to go.

Q: Were the French pretty active there?

LIMBERT: The French were very active. They had a cultural center there which was very active. The problem for the French was that Mauritania had a cultural divide between the Arabic speakers of the north and the Afro-Mauritanians in the south, about thirty per cent of the population. The latter identified much more closely with the French and many of them had emigrated to France, become French citizens. The French used to speak about "les franï¿½ais du vallï¿½e," "the French of the valley," the Sï¿½nï¿½gal River valley.

Of course the French still had to pay their veterans, many people from Mauritania had served in the French military and as veterans they were entitled to their pensions. There was in the French Embassy an office to distribute pensions to the veterans. As I said, many Afro-Mauritanians had French citizenship, so the French found themselves in the middle of a cultural dispute or conflict between French and Arabic. That didn't apply to us, because for us it wasn't an issue.

They were active. They had once had a military training mission, but at one time the French arrested an officer student in France, because he was accused of human rights violations in Mauritania. The Mauritanian government was furious and immediately pulled out their students all out of France and closed down the French military advisory mission.

At Independence, there was never any struggle, fighting for independence. Independence came peacefully in 1960. The ties were strong. Air France flew in three or four times a week. French tourists came out there. The French did a lot of the ethnographic work and helped build up the tourist infrastructure. So relations were not bad.

Q: Were the Israelis doing anything there?

LIMBERT: The Israelis? Not much. They were opening an eye hospital, to prevent eye diseases that were fairly common there. They were looking for other projects to do but they had a hard time staffing their embassy. Israeli diplomats didn't want to go there. You can kind of see why, because they had very tight security. For example, we walked everywhere. I went everywhere with no security, walked in town, walked on the beach. This poor guy, the Israeli ambassador, couldn't do it. So they tended to have a lot of TDY chargï¿½s. One of them came over to see me and he said, "Tell me, why are we here?" Why are we, Israelis, here? I said, "You shouldn't ask me that. We should ask you that!" He said, "I can't figure out what we're doing here." Clearly, it was to show the flag.

Q: Also, the fact that they had an Islamic state recognizing them was quite important.

LIMBEERT: An Arab state and I must say, the Mauritanians were pretty good about that, because during the second intifada both Egypt and Jordan either withdrew their ambassadors or lowered their level of representation in Israel and the Mauritanians did not and during that time the Mauritanian foreign minister even visited Israel. Some of the other Arab countries squawked and the Mauritanians basically told them to go jump in the lake.

When 9/11 happened, I'd been in Mauritania for less than a year. We'd gone on R&R, and my family and I were on leave up in Vermont, where we have a small place. Of course we heard the news of 9/11 in the morning, a perfect late summer day and we turned the radio on and we of course heard this incredible news and like everyone else I think we hoped it had been an accident to start with, it turned out it wasn't. Then there were reports, original reports, of a bomb having gone off at the State Department, which were never specifically contradicted, they just were never followed up on.

Q: My understanding was, I was actually at the State Department, getting off a bus, about the time the report came and security people came pouring out of the State Department, kind of looking around and I understand later it was said that the only sort of emergency procedure that they had that might possibly correspond to a plane crashing in was a bomb going off and that's why they pushed that particular button or something, which makes some sense.

LIMBERT: The story was that a bomb had gone off. You could believe anything at this time. The thing that was so striking for us was that here we were in this just idyllic place in the woods, up in the mountains, so calm and so peaceful and all this awfulness was going on in New York and in Washington at the same time. You just couldn't believe it.

I talked to Nouakchott. I had a very good DCM there.

Q: Who's that?

LIMBERT: John Olsen, who's an administrative officer, good African experience, very solid person. You know, they always say, "Don't pick a deputy who's like you. Pick someone who you can work with, but pick someone with different skills and abilities." And that's certainly true. My God, if there'd been two people like me at the head of that embassy it would have been a disaster. He's very solid, very systematic, good head for admin work and so forth.

Anyway, he was chargï¿½. I'd been chargï¿½, also, through long absences of ambassadors. He was perfectly capable of managing the place.

On the 13th we were supposed to fly from Boston to California, probably on one of those same flights that was hijacked, for a family wedding. We didn't go. We couldn't go. We ended up going to Boston and then taking the train to Washington. I think the planes were starting to fly again, but there was so much concern about planes. South Station in Boston was full of security, armed guards.

Anyway, we spent some time in Washington. Our son was with us. He was going back to Dubai, where he was living and I remember taking him to Dulles Airport, this would have been I guess about a week, ten days, after 9/11and everyone said "Be there early." Dulles was empty, because people weren't flying. So we got there very early, and ended up with nothing to do. It took him ten minutes to check in.

We went back to New York to visit our daughter and my brother in law came from Los Angeles. He's a structural engineer and he was asked to come and look at one of the churches in lower Manhattan located close to the World Trade Center. The idea was to see what kind of structural damage there was. Very interesting talking to him about the physics and engineering of what had happened.

We flew out of New York shortly after, we went back to post and we started talking to the Mauritanians about what had happened. Of course they did not have any role in it, but they very quickly picked up, we didn't tell them this, that in fact if anyone was the target of those who'd done 9/11, it was them and others like them in the Muslim world. I don't know if we had talking points to say this, but we didn't need them, because the Mauritanians understood that the kind of relationship that they were carrying on with the rest of the world was anathema to the extremist position, the terrorist position. As somebody said, "The extremists don't want to sit down at the table, they want to blow up the table." They don't want to convince us of anything, they just want to kill us. With the Mauritanians or other countries in the Muslim world, we certainly would have disagreements but at base there was agreement on the way you conduct relations, the way you conduct discourse, among countries and all of a sudden that principle became important.

It happened before, but nobody really thought much about it. All of a sudden there was a common interest, a shared interest in conducting relations. Not only we shared this interest, which was assumed, but it might be something that you would have to fight for. It wasn't just a given.

So over time, what I saw there and I know that my colleagues saw elsewhere, was a shifting of dialogue. Certain things that were never explicit became explicit, particularly since both we and the Mauritanians - and this was probably repeated in other places - now saw that there were people targeting us.

Q: When you got back to Mauritania, were the Mauritanian authorities taking special care, not only about us but also their own security. Were they looking for information, that sort of thing, to deal with possible terrorist attacks?

LIMBERT: Of course. Their having established relations with Israel and having preserved relations with Israel of course made them a target. Even more than that, their brand of politics made them part of what the al Qaeda people, the extremists, called the "apostate regimes." They were of that group and if you follow debates within extremist circles, one of the ongoing debates is "Do we go after the near enemy or the far enemy first?" The near enemy being the apostate regimes. Of course, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia may be at the top of the list, but Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria are out there as well, at the edge of their world. As I said, the Mauritanians knew this.

There were extremist currents within Mauritanian political life and the Mauritanians had tolerated them to some extent. I think following 9/11 gradually they became much less tolerant. They saw that this kind of extremist rhetoric could shift from words into actions.

Q: Did you see any movement towards Mauritania and Morocco, both being apostates, both getting closer together? They had a joint enemy now.

LIMBERT: Sure they did. It wasn't just that Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria all had enemies. We were part of that, as well and from the European side, the big player in Mauritania was Spain. Spain was the first step into Europe from that part of the world. Spain, which had been fairly relaxed on its visa policy, all of a sudden changed a great deal and became much more restrictive as to who it would let in, because of course, under the Schengen Agreement, people having gotten into Spain could travel pretty much anywhere within the European Union.

Q: What about al Jazeera and other elements of the Arab media? How were they playing in Mauritania?

LIMBERT: It was interesting. Al Jazeera had a following. It was, by necessity, an elite following, because you had to have electricity to get it, you had to be able to afford the satellite hookup to get it, none of which were cheap. But it was certainly followed by the Arab-speaking population, which was most of the political elite there.

Some of what al Jazeera said was not very friendly to us but it was mostly from an Arab nationalist point of view. It did not buy the religious extremist point of view, for the most part. They had some Islamic representatives on there, but I can remember when the campaign started in Afghanistan in October 2001 and al Jazeera tried to beat an anti-American drum at that point. It would bring people on saying how terrible this was and how Muslims were suffering and so forth and so on, but al Jazeera itself undercut the message, because they started showing people dancing in the streets of Kabul, getting their beards shaved, women going back to school and Afghans expressing great relief at what was going on. I didn't have a lot of convincing to do. Basically the situation spoke for itself.

Occasionally you would encounter sympathy for extremism. I remember, visiting a provincial governor, sitting in his salon. The protocol of these visits was that you did a lot of sitting around. Conversation dragged from time to time, but al Jazeera was on and he made some comment about suicide attackers, that they have legitimate grievances and so forth and so on. I asked him, "What if it was your child on that plane or one of your relatives on that plane, would you still feel the same way?" There was a certain amount of knee jerk support, but there wasn't that much.

The other thing al Jazeera did was unique in the Arab world. It explored issues that had never been explored before, issues of family, issues about women, issues about society, that the official Arab media would not touch. As for the official official Arab media, essentially their job was so show that a particular country was utopia.

They took a more realistic view. They also did very interesting things, like brining in contradictory points of view. They had Israelis on. This was unheard of in the Arab world. Something would happen somewhere in the Middle East and they would bring in different commentators, including Israeli commentators, usually Arabic speaking Israelis, where 10-15 years before Israel was never-never land and the idea that thinking human beings lived there was just the farthest from anyone's mind, was never admitted. But here these views were being beamed into the house.

Al Jazeera didn't like Mauritania very much. It didn't like its relations with Israel. So they had a couple of favorite Mauritanian dissidents that they would trot out from time to time. The talk shows were like something like you might see from some of our right wing nut jobs here, where the host and one side would gang up on the other person. That would happen a lot. So from time to time the Mauritanian government would close down the local al Jazeera office, for a few months, if it presented something they didn't like.

Q: How did our going initially into Afghanistan play there?

LIMBERT: It did not play badly at all. As I said, the images from Afghanistan of the music, the dancing in the streets, the celebrations, reopening of the schools, were very eloquent testimony. There was a certain amount of grumbling, but that grumbling really never got much traction.

Q: As the American ambassador in an Islamic state, albeit a peripheral Islamic state, were you deluged with instructions to go in and explain this, ask for support of that and all?

LIMBERT: Of course, but I always followed Tom Pickering's famous advice, which was, "If it makes you feel better, send me the instructions. I'll do what has to be done." This has always worked. Basically, if you're the person in the country and you know what makes sense, you know what needs to be done.

The French acronym for Mauritania is RIM: Republique Islamique de Mauritanie. So we used to call it "life on the RIM" and it was definitely life on the rim. You were on the rim of the Atlantic, the rim of Africa. It was not a major subject of importance or interest for the United States.

That was a period, stating at 9/11, there was a lot of soul searching about "Why do they hate us?" or "What are we doing wrong?" or "What do we need to do?" There was a lot of back and forth about "You gotta do more of this," "You gotta do more of that." As did some of my colleagues, I sent in ideas that we thought might be helpful, but I don't think they ever paid any attention to them. We made the point that the political elites that we deal with are smart people and if we patronize them and say the equivalent of, "Some of our best friends are Muslims," it's just silly, will have no effect.

I'm not going to go in front of an audience of Mauritanians and say how much the United States loves Islam. That's just silly. Nor am I going to lecture a Muslim audience on what is true Islam and what is not.

I can remember one of the sillier instructions we got - and we get silly instructions all the time. Somebody decided that U.S. ambassadors should host Ramadan breakings of the fast (iftar) in the evenings, for their Muslim colleagues. I got this instruction, it had gone to sixty or seventy countries, I sat down with my staff and I said, "Is it just me, or does this strike you as being a little bit odd?" It would be like Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador here, hosting a Christmas party. What's the point of it?

Yes, if the President wants to host iftar for the resident Islamic diplomatic corps, that's fine. But here we are, in an Islamic country, and we don't represent Islam.

One of the points about Ramadan, is that it's a time of charity. So the American staff of the embassy, which was not large, maybe 15 or 20 people, including family members and so forth in the mission, at our own expense, hosted an iftar for our Mauritanian staff, which was about two hundred people. We went out and got a number of roast lambs and put out carpets in the back yard. The weather was pleasant, and we had a nice evening and invited people over. That was the real meaning of Ramadan, and I heard a lot of positive things about it around town the next couple of days. "Oh, you did that? That was a nice thing to do." Because what that did was to catch the spirit of Ramadan: again, charity, generosity. This is just something we wanted to do.

But, as I said, there was a lot of stuff going on. I don't know if you remember the so-called Shared Values campaign.

Q: No. What was that?

LIMBERT: We created this under secretary for something or other, public affairs or whatever it was and she had the idea of, from the business world or the advertising world, doing this campaign, so-called Shared Values and it was very patronizing. It showed Muslim families in the United States, and how wonderful it was for them. Of course, these were very highly educated people, engineers, PhD's, all these people having this wonderful, tolerant life here. Of course had I seen that, in most places, I would have said, "Yes! Give me the visa, so I can enjoy that, too!" It had a certain cluelessness about it that was unfortunate.

Unfortunately, the bureaucracy was not interested in hearing much news from the field. There were some people who made the effort. Some of us sent in messages when we were solicited for our ideas. We made the mistake of thinking that when we were solicited they would actually want to hear ideas. Should have known better than that, after so many years in the service.

So, as I said, we talked about not only appealing to emotion but appealing to the brain, not being apologetic, avoiding discussions of theology. One of our colleagues made the mistake of saying something like, "Osama bin Laden is not a good Muslim." Well, the answer was, yes, he is. He says his prayers, he keeps his fasts, he's gone on pilgrimage, he gives charity. That's not a discussion you want to get into.

Q: When did you leave Mauritania?

LIMBERT: I left once, in March of 2003, to go to Iraq but then I came back in May of 2003 and then left for good in August of 2003.

Q: So you were there at the time we went into Iraq?

LIMBERT: Yes.

Q: Again, we're talking about, you're really at considerable distance removed from this, but how were you and your fellow officers in the Arab world and all, how did you view this whole approach towards Iraq at the time?

LIMBERT: Folly. We knew it was folly, but what could you do? It was clear that that this had been determined, this was what was going to be done.

Q: Did you find the rationale, that al Qaeda was behind this, did any of that make any sense?

LIMBERT: No, that was silly. But I can remember, in 1991, after the first Gulf War, when we had defeated the Iraqi armies and made the decision not to go any farther than that and go into Baghdad, we drew a lot of criticism and maybe rightly so because of what happened to the Shia and what happened to the Kurds in Iraq. But it was still the right decision. People at the time made the point: we go there, we're going to get stuck in the middle of a civil war. This is not rocket science. This is basic stuff.

Q: Was there the equivalent, as you were sitting at various posts, of an Arabist cabal, who were sitting around sending emails to each other saying, "What the hell is going on?" or were each sort of living in your own isolated, what you were picking up from cables

LIMBERT: Well, for one thing, the State Department was not part of the process. As the Gilbert and Sullivan line goes, "Your opinion doesn't matter." Our opinion clearly did not matter. The administration was determined to do this and we, as servants of the government, are expected to salute. But politically, intellectually, historically, it made no sense at all.

Q: I'm trying to capture attitudes at the time. What was your impression, when he came in and during this period leading up to the war, of Colin Powell?

LIMBERT: Very positive. He had probably, single-handedly, done more to rebuild the Foreign Service and restore the Foreign Service, after some very difficult days, than probably any secretary that I can remember. Remember, when I arrived in Nouakchott in November 2000, our physical mission, our people mission and our policy mission was in shambles, out of neglect. It was like Gerald Ford reportedly said to New York City in 1974, remember that, "drop dead." Basically, that was it, if you're out there, drop dead. We'd gone below critical mass. We couldn't do our mission with what we had. He came in he looked around and he just said, "This is unacceptable."

Not only did he not accept it, he turned it around. We got the people we need, basic security, basic health services. There were some times I came that close to shutting down the whole mission, because of health problems. That and to restore our confidence in ourselves and our confidence that in fact what we were doing mattered, that made a tremendous difference. He also did some very symbolic things, like going to swearing in of every new class, not just A-100, but of specialists and civil servants, personally swearing in every ambassador. Who was the last secretary who had done that? Madeleine Albright, with all due respect, you'd be with her, it was very clear she wanted to be somewhere else.

I don't know if it was his military background or just his personality, but Powell felt responsible for the people who worked for him. Then others picked that up. So he made a huge difference.

Q: Did a point come, though, his presentation to the United Nations about Iraq's criminality, Saddam Hussein and all, how did this play? He was on board, as far as our attack into Iraq?

LIMBERT: What was his choice?

Q: Well, the choice, as always, you resign.

LIMBERT: Exactly. But Colin Powell's strength was never on the policy issues and it was very clear he was not part of this decision. Neither he personally nor the State Department were involved and they were expected to do what they were told to do. He was the person who had credibility. So he went and made the best case he could. As a professional, we all understand this. Sometimes you've got a bad case to argue and the mark of our professionalism sometimes is how well we do that. Anybody can argue a good case. What if we have a bad case? Your professionalism is how well you do that.

Q: There is the question, you're marching towards an abyss. Do you go along with it?

LIMBERT: The reality is that those kinds of decisions are rarely "Eureka!" moments. Rarely does it come to a point to say, "Okay, now I have a fateful decision to make. I keep marching straight, we go to the abyss. Do I take us to the abyss or don't I?" Usually it's not that obvious. So what happens is, you can look back on them and say, "Oh, my God! I should have done this at that point, or I should have realized how important this was." But at the time, very often, you don't realize the import of the decisions you're making.

Q: We've had an interview on that time. I'd like to almost repeat it, to put into the context of this. What were you getting out of Iraq before they called you up? Were you getting any feel about what was going to happen?

LIMBERT: There was a feeling inevitability. This was going to happen, whatever I personally thought about it, whatever Colin Powell personally thought about it, whatever all my colleagues personally thought about it, this was going to happen. I remember going to see the Mauritanians about this and their sense was this is going to happen, whatever we think about it. The U.S. is going to do it. They were smart enough to know it was not my call. If they had said to me, "This is the dumbest idea that we've ever heard" it would have made absolutely no difference.

The best that anyone could say, in a Middle Eastern, indirect way, was to say, "If you can do this quickly and cleanly, you'll get away with it." If you take that on its face value, it's one thing, but I think what people were telling us was, "You don't have a hope in hell of doing this quickly and cleanly and you better be prepared for some very unpleasant consequences."

Q: Okay, so, John, what happened, to you?

LIMBERT: In early March 2003, I got a call from somebody in the Near East bureau, a friend of mine, or someone I thought was a friend. He said, "Hold on to your chair! Would you be willing to go to Iraq, to serve as an advisor in the new administration there, a senior advisor?" After I calmed down a minute, I said, "Well, could you be more specific?" He said, "Well, we can't, but we think you'd be the senior advisor to the new ministry of commerce." I thought that was funny, because my knowledge of commerce is less than satisfactory, but there it was. Of course, as you know, Stu, when the State Department says, "Would you like to?" it's not really a question.

So, really, at that point, I had a choice: I could go or I could say, "I'm sorry, I'm not going to do this." And had I done that, then I could have served out the remaining six months of my time as ambassador and retired. No one said that, but that was clear enough. No one put a gun to my head.

So my wife at that time had gone to New York to be with our daughter, who was having a small operation. I talked it over with them and neither of them was very happy about the war. They shared my view of what a mistake it was, but my wife and daughter both said, "You should go."

So then I called back and said I would do it. They said, "Well, we don't think it's commerce. It might be the ministry of planning." I said, "Look, this is the Foreign Service. Whatever you tell me to do, I'll do it. If that's what you need, that's what you need." And then, half jokingly, I said, "I'll do pretty much anything except religion." And then they said something to the effect of, "How soon can you get to Kuwait?" I said, "Well, I'll pack my bags but I want to make sure" that this place is safe before I go. How long do you need me?" They said, "Six weeks."

I don't recall the dates exactly, but the date the bombing campaign started, I was in Mauritania, and I went to see the interior minister. I wanted to talk with him about embassy security, just to make sure our embassy was secure. Going over, I flew the flag and my car got attacked. One or two people tried to get at the car. I went to the interior minister, got assurances on the security of our people, security of the mission, security of the Peace Corps folks and came back, without the flag.

Q: Your car was attacked how?

LIMBERT: Some men from the street kind of tried to run at it, yelled a few things. I think some people threw some stones. This was an emotional issue.

So, anyway, I decided better not fly the flag. When I came back from Iraq, there hadn't been a lot of disturbances. I think there may have been one march which got directed away from the embassy.

And then I got a call saying, "Can you go to Kuwait as soon as possible? When you get to Kuwait report to General Garner's staff." General Garner was head of something called the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, he was putting his team together in Kuwait.

Well, I didn't quite know why they were pushing me to go so quickly. As a matter of fact, we sat in Kuwait for about a month, not doing a lot. But what I didn't realize then was that, this has of course all come out in accounts since, was that back in this town there was this tremendous food fight going on between Rumsfeld and Powell over who was going to staff the reconstruction effort, and who was going to manage it. State I think had bargained for a certain number of positions, but Rumsfeld still wanted veto power over individuals. There was a question over who would be number one and who would be number two at different ministries. This was going back and forth and it was very odd. I had the impression that Rumsfeld and his folks didn't know what they wanted, but they sure knew what they didn't want. There was almost a visceral opposition to anybody that State would put forward.

Well, of course, I was coming to this game blissfully ignorant of all this, but also I was coming from a completely different direction, so no one had to clear me into the country. Defense didn't have to clear me into the country. I just got on a plane, snuck in under the radar and was there.

For a while, the senior State contingent of General Garner's team was very small. I think it was Barbara Bodine and me. Then Tim Carney showed up, gradually all these other people started showing up. A lot of people got stuck in this back and forth between the Pentagon and State.

So, anyway, just to finish the story, I get to Kuwait, make my way to the hotel where we're all staying, a big resort hotel outside Kuwait City, actually quite nice and then the next morning I go and meet General Garner's people and his first words to me are, "So glad you're here and so happy you're going to be in charge of religion."

Q: Had military action already taken place when you got there or not?

LIMBERT: Yes, it had just started. One consideration for me on the timing was that I didn't want to leave Nouakchott until I after the military operation started that our own mission was safe. One of the considerations was there could be local reaction, there could be popular reaction, aimed at us. We had talked to the host government, we had reassurances from the Mauritanians in terms of embassy security. I just wanted to make sure that everything was okay there. I still thought that was my first responsibility, after all, to make sure that people were safe. Although the people I was talking to the Department wanted me to get to Kuwait as quickly as possible, I said, "You'll have to wait a little bit, until I'm sure that everything here is okay." I had a very good deputy, who then became in charge of the embassy, so when I felt comfortable about leaving once the actual military action had started.

Q: It was at that time called the Islamic Republic of Mauritania?

LIMBERT: It still is.

Q: So this is the reason, we're talking about there might be a reaction from Islamic countries, because of our invasion of an Islamic, or quasi-Islamic, country?

LIMBERT: That's right. It is a hundred per cent Muslim. It's also an Arab country, a member of the Arab League. In the buildup to this war, they were saying what many of the other Muslim countries, Arab countries were saying, which was, "If you're going to do this, do it quickly and cleanly, because if it drags on there could be problems." Implied though unstated was, "We know you're going to do this whatever we say, so we're not going to waste our breath advising you not to."

Q: Could you describe the group of people, both Jay Garner but also the other people who came on that team, while you were in Kuwait, what were you talking about, what was the composition?

LIMBERT: Motley crew comes to mind. I don't mean the band, either. What I didn't realize and I only realized later, and Bob Woodward has sketched this out pretty well in his book, was the political food fight that was going on back here over the composition of our group. And what that explained was why my contacts in the Department were so anxious that I should get to Kuwait as soon as possible. Garner led something called the Organization for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. It was called ORHA in those days. It was the predecessor of what was later called the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority and then later became the U.S. embassy.

General Garner, a retired three star general, was putting this together, but he worked for the Defense Department. It was a Department of Defense operation. To say that were people in the Defense Department who were micromanaging this operation was an understatement, really. This was micromanagement on steroids, down to the details of who was going to be working with Garner and what each person was going to be doing. To get somebody appointed and out of Washington, one had to go through the Department of Defense system, because that person had to be detailed to the Department of Defense.

Well, I was not in Washington, so the Department of State, which, as I understand the process, negotiated an agreement saying, "We put our people on this team," on General Garner's team and it even got down to numbers, I believe, so may seats. It's a little bit like negotiating for a coalition in the Israeli government, down to that level. Although there seemed to be agreement on numbers, there never an agreement on who and in what position.

So amid all of that infighting, the Department said, "We've got this person out in Mauritania, and we can send him right to Kuwait, and nobody will be the wiser." So I showed up there, flying under the radar, so to speak.

Q: Correct me if I'm wrong, John, but we're talking about the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was trying very hard not only to micromanage but to exclude the State Department. It's my interpretation but he strived]to prove that he had his cohorts could do this all on their own, without interference from the State Department people, because they were always talking about "The culture won't stand it or the people are this way or that way." These were people, under Rumsfeld, who thought they knew best how it would go.

LIMBERT: I don't know, Stu. Thinking back on it, after more than four years, I'm not sure how much of it was ideology and how much of it was a guy thing, just testosterone.

Q: I think you're talking about, I think there was a big ego in there.

LIMBERT: Exactly. Who was going to be the top dog.

Q: And not just Rumsfeld, but his cohorts.

LIMBERT: That's right. There was very little self-doubt. These were ideologues who knew the way the world was run. I don't know if they'd ever been out of the United States, much less to the Middle East. And frankly, they were not interested in the opinion or the experience, of people who might ask questions about "What are the consequences of putting American forces into the middle of a very complex and difficult situation, with the background involved, with the ethnic make-up, with the religious make-up of Iraq, with the particularly violent history of Iraq and what's the consequence of putting outside forces in there and what are we getting into?" Not so much "should we or shouldn't we" but "If you do this, what's going to happen?"

You asked about the make-up of this. It was a very mixed bag of people. You had some very good Civil Service people from other parts of the government, Treasury, Commerce, Justice, all very competent. You had some Foreign Service people, a number retired, a number, like me, on active duty. Then you had people, for the life of me I couldn't figure out why they were there or what they were up to. They seemed to be lurking in the background.

Q: Well, before you went there, was there sort of an ingathering of all of you, trying to figure out what to do and did this break into groups, sort of Foreign Service types, maybe others?

LIMBERT: There may have been in Washington, but I was never part of that.

Q: But when you were in Kuwait?

LIMBERT: In Kuwait, we had endless meetings. But here's what happened. Garner's team was divided into three parts. There was the humanitarian piece of it, there was the reconstruction piece of it and then there was civil administration piece of it. Most of the Foreign Service people there were part of civil administration and they represented shadow ministries. The idea was that you put somebody into an existing ministry to help it reconstitute itself and start up again after the Baath government is gone.

The assumption was that the humanitarian piece would be the most important, based on the experience of 1991, when, following Operation Desert Storm, there had been a huge humanitarian crisis inside Iraq, particularly the flight of hundreds of thousands, perhaps more, people from Kurdistan, which overwhelmed the neighboring countries. That's where Jay Garner came into the picture, because he had worked in Operation Provide Comfort to help the Kurds in '91. He'd done it very successfully, was very well remembered. So a huge piece of the operation was to be humanitarian.

The second piece was to the reconstruction. Civil administration was an afterthought, the idea being we could send a group of Civil Service, Foreign Service career people to work with the Iraqi administration, to help them work with whatever transition group there was, to be a contact with the U.S. military. That was the smallest piece of the operation as foreseen.

Obviously events did not work this way, but that was the planning. We did endless planning. We had endless meetings. The other part of it is that each of these three pieces had someone in charge of them. The person in charge of civil administration was clearly not the right person. Again, some of the writers of subsequent accounts talk about this, but I'm not going to mention the name. How they chose him, how he came there, was unclear. I think he was a political appointee. But he never took charge of that operation, so we drifted around by ourselves and formed our own teams.

I first established the fact that I was not going to do religious affairs. It was hard to think of anything more wrong than putting an outsider in charge of religious affairs in a Muslim country. That's about as bad as you can get. There may be stupider things to do, but I couldn't figure out one. So they said, "Okay, we'll put you in charge of cultural affairs," which on the surface, was very appealing. Iraq, has its archeology, its history, and a culture of literary. In the Arab world they say books are written in Cairo, published in Beirut, and read in Baghdad. Baghdad had a very vibrant cultural life, not only with books but music, art, sculpture, and painting. Even Saddam Hussein had used it but he had not eliminated it. So I had visions of myself hanging out with writers and artists and sculptors and reestablishing cultural exchanges with museums in the United States, all of these things. My most grandiose fantasy was to take Saddam's palaces and convert them into public parks or museums of bad taste.

That idea tells you the unreality of where we were, but that was the kind of thinking we were doing. Since we were on our own, I found some people, mostly Foreign Service people, who had similar interests and we formed a kind of core cultural cell. I found some military people, mostly civil affairs folks, who were also interested in these things.

I had chaplains approaching me, military chaplains. I don't know if they thought I was doing religious affairs, but some of what they wanted to do was pretty scary. I tried, politely, to discourage them.

Q: Were they trying to Christianize

LIMBERT: They didn't say it but you could sense that.

Q: When you were coming up with these wonderful ideas, were some of you saying, "Gee, I don't think this thing is going to work"? In fact, I had one person who said "We were concerned we might be dealing with a fiasco."

LIMBERT: Oh, yeah. I think we talked about that earlier.

Q: I think you're the person I'm quoting.

LIMBERT: You're quoting my own words back to me, which was true. Look, there was a group of very smart people: Tim Carney was there, Dave Dunford was there, Barbara Bodine was there.

Q: Robin Raphel?

LIMBERT: She came in a little bit later. We all looked at each other and said, "Is it just me or is this the most screwed up operation that we've ever seen?" It was cold comfort to know, "No, it isn't just me." In the Foreign Service, after a while, if you hang along long enough you have a nose for fiasco and, it was there, because, first of all, there was no leadership about where we were going. There was no vision, in terms of "Here's what we're going to do!"

It sounds strange, but there was no money. If someone is going to go and work with the Iraqis on reconstituting, for example, a cultural program or an economic program or a justice program, you can't do that with an empty pocket. You can't go to the Iraqis and say, "You ought to do this!" You have to go in and say, "Here, let's figure out how to do this and we can help you!"

Simple things, like we said, "Okay, each of us who is in charge of an area is going to need what we called 'walking around money'" meaning small project money, some place that needed five thousand dollars immediately to fix the roof, the roof was leaking and a valuable collection of books was being ruined, you had to have that money. Seems like an unremarkable idea. There was no structure in which to get this done. We went to Jay Garner, and Garner agreed. Whoever he dealt with back here turned it down. In retrospect, I think they didn't want us doing anything.

Q: I think also there was this idea, this thing ought to be done on the cheap and you had some very cheap guys back in Washington.

LIMBERT: I don't know if they thought on the cheap, or on the easy. Maybe both. Here's what I thing was particularly appalling. You mentioned fiasco. The assumption was that our operation, ORHA, would be in existence for about sixty days. Military goes in, defeats the Iraqi Army, ORHA comes in, helps set up a civil administration, goes away. ORHA becomes an embassy and some interim Iraqi administration starts running things. Maybe there's some residual help. But if our organization is going to exist for only sixty days, then there was little urgency to set up any kind of structure. The thought was, "We can do this on the cheap, we can do it without any particular organization and it doesn't matter who we put in charge. We can take some political operative from Kansas and put him in charge and it won't make any difference. We're only going to be there sixty days."

Well, I'm no expert on Iraq and neither were most of my colleagues, but we all looked at each other and said, "This is a lot harder than they think. Do they know anything about this country, about what the background is, about what the resentments are, what's bubbling under the surface? They better think more than sixty days, 'cause sixty days isn't going to work!"

Q: You were the cultural guy. Were you concerned, one, that you might blow up the great museums, the tremendous cultural reservoir in museums and libraries there? Was there anybody in the military you could talk to to pinpoint these things and also was there anybody who was there any thought of saying, "In the interim, we'd better try to protect the cultural artifacts?"

LIMBERT: Actually, the military had done a reasonable job of this. They had talked with a group of people back here and had gotten names of places and map coordinates of the major sites. There were people in the military, I think reservists, who understood this, who understood the history and the archeology.

Part of the problem was that there was very little communication between ORHA, the civilians, and Central Command, the military. Basically they didn't want to talk to us. They were going to do their own thing. Normally, as a civilian, you'd go through what we call the political advisor. The political advisor is normally a senior Foreign Service Officer, ambassadorial rank, assigned to be the advisor to, in this case, Tommy Franks, to the theater commander. They weren't answering the phone. They weren't returning calls.

Q: Was there a political advisor?

LIMBERT: There was.

Q: Who was it?

LIMBERT: Ambassador David Litt was the political advisor. Basically, that line got cut off. The State people in Washington told me later that had the same experience dealing with Central Command.

Q: Did you know anything about David Litt?

LIMBERT: Yeah, I knew him. We knew each other. We were colleagues. I can't say what happened but clearly that line of communication got cut. So, essentially, the military was going to do what the military was going to do. To quote again the line from Gilbert and Sullivan, "Our opinion didn't matter."

Q: "It really doesn't matter."

LIMBERT: That's right.

Q: Were you working on the assumption that there would be the military campaign and then you would dust off your attachï¿½ case, put your coat and tie on, polish your shoes and walk into the ministry of culture?

LIMBERT: Exactly. The military called this Phase Three and Phase Four. Phase Three was the fighting, Phase Four is after the fighting. Each of us would do what we do best in our profession, which is walk into an existing ministry, minus the top cadre, three or four Baathi officials, who would be gone and we would deal with the existing technocratic structure. Iraq had the advantage of a literate population, a well-educated population and a more or less functioning bureaucracy. So the assumption would be that this would be very smooth operation. There were those of us who thought, "Well, maybe it's going to be more complicated than that."

Q: Did you know anything about the ministry? I assume there was a ministry of culture.

LIMBERT: There was, but I didn't know anything about it. I couldn't find out anything about it. I talked to some museum people and archeologists here and in London who had contact with the Iraqi Museum, from Kuwait. Once we got to Iraq, things got much more difficult.

I asked, "What's the relation, for example, between the museum and the ministry of culture?" and they said, "We think there's a relation." The sources, at one point they said, "No, there's no ministry of culture, it's all part of the ministry of information." Another source said, "No, there's a ministry of information and a ministry of culture." Basically, nobody knew. I didn't find out anything about it. The Iraqis who were with us in Kuwait, but they were all of the Chalabi crowd, at least the ones I met and they hadn't been in Iraq in thirty years.

Q: What was the impression of you and your colleagues to the Chalabi crowd?

LIMBERT: Nice people but not relevant to what needed to be done. I remember one night in Kuwait Jay Garner came to some of us and said, "I'm having dinner with an Iraqi sheik. Why don't you come? Might be interesting. They tell me that this person, he's from the south, he's a Shia, he has somewhere in the neighborhood of about a million and a half followers. He could be very important to us."

Turned out the guy had spent the last thirty years in Marbella, Spain. Very nice dinner and very pleasant conversation, but how do you sort of get the message across that this crew that you have, that their views might not be the most relevant to what we're going to have to do, because we didn't know what we were going into. Our own experience and common sense tell you, this may not be the best.

These were the Iraqis we were given. Ahmad Chalabi's nephew, I think, a very nice man, who had studied at the University of Chicago, I believe, was an investment banker. I could be wrong about just what he was doing but I think he was Chalabi's nephew. There were some other Iraqis there who were very pleasant to talk to. They were very interesting to talk to, but in terms of being current or being able to give some advice that was helpful, I didn't see that they were terribly useful to us. But how do you go to anybody, Jay Garner or anyone, and say, "You know, these might not be the most useful people to be talking to"?

Q: One of the reflexes I've had and I'm sure we've all had in the Foreign Service, particularly in a country that's going through, has people getting out of it for political reasons, is that, very quickly, anybody who flees that country no longer is relevant, with minor exceptions. Just like the Cuban exiles in Miami, you know they could never go back.

We've all been through this. I got this in the Foreign Service when I was in Frankfurt in '55, watching these German-Americans trying to go back and run things in their villages and they were cast out.

LIMBERT: Then there's the famous story of the diplomat in Switzerland in 1917, gets a call from the receptionist, saying, "There's somebody here at the front desk, wants to talk to you. He says he's going to make a revolution in Russia. His name is Lenin or something." He says, "No, I'm late for my tennis date."

Q: Was there, with this group, any contact with the State Department, any direction from the State Department?

LIMBERT: Almost none. My impression was, basically we were OTF, out there flapping. There are other acronyms you could use, but that's the more polite one. It was very clear, that our State colleagues were doing their best but they were cut out of things here in Washington. Not only was it a Defense Department show, but it was a military show. State's role in this was the bare minimum.

Q: We've come up to that point, you're all getting ready. What happens?

LIMBERT: Now things really get interesting. The right wing press back here is running articles every day attacking members of our group. The State Department will not answer these things, being its usual pusillanimous self, and will not respond. Most of us are half way between disbelief and unreality. Part of you says this thing is going to be a fiasco, another part of you says, "Okay, what can we actually do, is there something we can do, based on the hand we're dealt?" If there's anything the Foreign Service does, it demonstrates the old clichï¿½ about, "You play the hand you're dealt." And very often you're dealt a pair of deuces, so when you're dealt a pair of deuces what do you do? So that's why we sat around and said, "Well, we can do this, or we can do that or we can do this other thing, we can have these events or do these other things" based on pretty much nothing more than impressions and what you know or what you think might be a good idea. There was this detachment from reality.

Okay, so, I'm having this wonderful idea that, as the cultural wallah, I will hang out with artists and painters and sculptors and musicians and we'll build this new, non-Baathist culture. We'll get rid of all these gross statues and we'll put up something much nicer and we'll open the palaces to the public and these lovely gardens, turn them into public gardens and so forth.

And then occur the events at the Iraq Museum, where the U.S. troops occupy Baghdad on I think it was the 9th of April. Reports start coming out about looting at the Iraq Museum and the first reports are very alarming: all is gone, thousands of artifacts are gone, everything is destroyed, thousands of years of history gone like that. Of course my job now goes from running this obscure cultural niche to being front page news.

So I wake up one morning and at breakfast one of my colleagues comes and says, "Congratulations!" And I said, "Congratulations for what?" He said, "Oh, you are now the person in charge of restoring the Iraq Museum." I said, "I am? Nobody ever told me this!" He said, "Well, Colin Powell said it, so it must be true!" I looked on the internet and there it was: Powell said, "Yes, we have so and so, he's out there and by God he's going to restore the Iraq Museum." I said a few things at the moment that were perhaps unprintable, thinking, "How does he suggest I do that?"

I started getting, of course, calls from the press, calls from people in the U.S., all very concerned about all this. I got calls from museum people, from university people, from archeologists, from historians, saying, "How can I help?" I know one colleague came and said, "I'm going to take all my money out of the Credit Union and I'm going to send a check to buy back the artifacts. Who do I sent it to?" It was that sort of reaction.

Of course, like in all these things, we always say the first report is wrong, the second report is wrong, the third report is wrong. We don't know what's going on on the ground and I'll be damned if I could find out.

Q: You're still in Kuwait?

LIMBERT: Still in Kuwait and almost no communications. Just these press reports coming out of Iraq. That's where our communications, particularly with the military, broke down, because one thing was obvious. We were headed for, if not a material disaster, a public relations disaster of the first order. That's where Central Command, based in Doha at the time, stopped returning telephone calls. Not from me, not from the department, not from anybody.

I still get knots in my stomach thinking about how helpless, the feeling of utter helplessness, we had at the time, absolute inability to influence what was going on.

Q: You're getting these calls from major news organizations, you're the man in charge. Did you tell them the reality, that you had no contact? What did you tell them?

LIMBERT: Well, most understood you're absolutely powerless to influence things.

Q: What did you do?

LIMBERT: Basically, I tried to turn it around: "Can you use your sources, we don't know what's going on the ground in Baghdad. What do you know? Do you have a source, somebody I can call?"

There was a very nice Iraqi archeologist who worked in London who said, "I used to be at the museum. I'm worried about the people there." She gave me some names, and she gave me some telephone numbers. They didn't work at the time, but when I got there I had these names and telephone numbers. I could go and check on those people.

It doesn't do a lot of good to say, "You think you're talking to somebody who can do something about this?" That's not really very helpful.

Q: I take it your other colleagues were undergoing the same frustration, weren't they? Yours happened to be on the front page, but the ministries were being looted and all that.

LIMBERT: I can't speak for them. The other piece of it, of the frustration was, doing what we're all trained to do, you go back to your Foreign Service friends and your colleagues and say, "Look, you're at the center of things. You gotta help us out here." And basically the response was hand wringing, saying, "Gosh, that's awful! Somebody ought to do something about that!" That didn't improve my mood, either.

Q: Your group, was it chaffing at the bit to get going and enter Iraq and do something or what?

LIMBERT: That was another issue. Because Garner himself, General Garner was reluctant to go in if we could not do our mission as planned and it was clear that the situation in Iraq was chaotic. But I gather he was finally ordered, "Get into Iraq! Get there and fix it!" whatever the situation was. So the situation we were going into was far more unstable and chaotic than we had foreseen. What whoever was in charge of this operation had not foreseen and had not even planned for was the collapse of security and administration and the need to do something about it.

Q: So when did you go in and

LIMBERT: Went in on the 23rd of April. I think on the 15th the military had taken positions at the Iraq Museum, about two or three days after Secretary Powell had said they had done so. That was one of the most discouraging spectacles of the whole time, to see how he was sort of personally disrespected and shoved aside.

Q: I think Colin Powell comes out as one of the tragic figures, a man who really could have been president, highly admired and yet was completely dismissed by Rumsfeld and company.

LIMBERT: It was almost as though this was done deliberately. "Powell said we're going to have to put security at the museum. Let's show him how much his word matters." And then he became the front man. Every day, the press would say to him, "Mr. Secretary, what about the Iraq Museum?" Now, is he going to say, "I'm sorry, ask Mr. Rumsfeld, he's in charge, I'm just a potted plant around here"?

Q: Well, what did you find, when you got in on the 23rd of April?

LIMBERT: Oh, my God! The stuff of your worst nightmares. I'll tell you about it.

Q: Please do.

LIMBERT: We flew up there on the 23rd in a C-130. It was one of those wonderful military operations where you're told, "Be ready to go at 0130." I don't know what it is about the military. They seem to like that time slot between midnight and three a.m. And then, of course, you're ready at 0130 and the plane didn't fly until like 8:30. We just hung around. We flew in with Garner. Some people came up later by land convoy. The idea was, "Let's visit the three most important sectors and show how important these are." So now we're getting away from humanitarian affairs. That is off the board and the reconstruction/civil administration piece is now coming into its own. So we'll visit a hospital, a water treatment plant and we'll visit a power plant. Health, clean water, sanitation and electricity, three vital sectors.

We get off the plane, straggle into cars. There was this undignified scramble for places that you always have. We drove off to the Yarmouk Hospital, one of the major government hospitals in Baghdad. We get there and a lot of the staff is still there and as we're getting out of the cars I hear two Iraqis on the side saying, "Who is that person?" referring to Jay Garner. The other one said, "Oh, he's the new president."

So that's what the Iraqis were expecting, at least that's what those two Iraqis were expecting and I imagine that others were, too. So, okay, Saddam is gone, good riddance, now who's going to run things? Who's the new president?

So we get in the hospital. Beds are looted. Dialysis machines are looted. EKG machines are looted. Blood banks are looted. Livers are looted. Medicines are looted. Air conditioners are looted. It's in bad shape.

We go through the hospital, take a look. Garner meets with the staff in an assembly hall there. He meets with the staff, says, "Thank you for your efforts. We gotta get this place back on its feet! We gotta work together. Tell me what you need."

As we're about to go, a group of gentlemen in long robes and turbans come up and say, "Excuse me, but you better talk to us." "Who are you?" "We're from the hawza the Shiite theological center and we're in charge, here, not these technocrats. You better talk to us." So we say to Garner, "Jay, I think we have a problem. We gotta talk to these guys." So we go into another room and these guys start telling us that the previous administration were thieves, the previous administration were incompetent, the previous administration were not dealing with the patients and now we, the hawza, the Shiite theological center, is in charge of this hospital. I'm sitting next to one of these people and I put on my dumbest face and say, "Excuse me, sir, but could you explain something to me? Could you explain to me the relationship between a theological center and a hospital?" He looks at me and he's thinking, "These Americans are stupid. They really don't understand anything." Because, of course, the question was money and power and the question was who's going to have it. These people from the Shiite side were making their move already.

Poor Jay Garner. I don't think he ever knew what hit him. But we all looked at each other collectively, we being the Foreign Service crew, we all looked at each other and said wordlessly, "Oh, heck." (the G-rated version). Meaning, "This is going to be a lot more difficult, a lot more complicated, than we thought. What had we walked in to? We had walked into a hornet's nest, where hospitals become the battle ground for long repressed and suppressed divisions in the society. So now here's a group that was on the bottom and things have changed, now it's their turn and they're going to take control, starting here. That was their message to us, that was their message to Garner. We were not in a technocratic world anymore. This is like hour two of our time in Iraq and we're sitting there thinking, "This isn't a sixty day, in and out operation anymore."

Q: Did Garner have the equivalent to a military aide or contact?

LIMBERT: He really didn't. He didn't have a proper staff. He was from the military but he wasn't of the military in this operation. Frankly, he was treated disgracefully.

Q: Did you have any real contact with sort of the fighting troops?

LIMBERT: Yes, I did, actually, on a kind of day to day basis, but I wouldn't say there was effective coordination, where we would sit down and plan something out together and say, "How are we going to do this? How are we going to do that?"

That was the huge gap. On a macro level, stepping back for a second, it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that the first, second and third requirement in Iraq in April of 2003 was security. Without security, none of the rest of our mission amounted to a hill of beans. We couldn't do anything. You couldn't protect the facilities, you couldn't set up an administration. That story at the hospital was repeated over and over again.

Q: Did you visit the other places, the water treatment plant

LIMBERT: Okay, going on, we went then from there to a water treatment plant. It was deserted. Nobody there. It was spooky. So we had our lunch there. Lunch at the sewer works in romantic Baghdad.

Then we went on to the power plant. The power plant had GE equipment from the Sixties that they bought. I remember helping to sell these gas turbines other places in the Middle East. Basically they were held together with Scotch tape and baling wire but there were engineers, there were parts. This was clearly a fixable issue, with enough money, time and equipment, if there was sufficient security.

But that was the first day and, as I said, things did not look good.

Q: Was there sort of an ingathering, saying, "Okay, what are we going to do?"

LIMBERT: No, that was part of the problem, because there was nobody on Garner's staff I could see that would think this way. You or I, in this situation, the first thing we would do is say, "We better huddle, sit down and figure out where we go from here. Am I going to have to get on the phone back to somebody in the Pentagon, do we have to do this, do we have to do that? What are we seeing and what does it matter?" Now I don't know what Garner was saying back to people in Washington, but I don't remember any sit downs to say, "Okay, here's where we go."

Q: Then, let's move to sort of the second day and thereon.

LIMBERT: On the second day I went to the museum. That was clearly the thing I needed to do, to show that this new administration cared about the museum, and to find out what the reality was. I thought I would have a group of civilians, at least one or two other people to help me with this portfolio, but they all disappeared. The military or somebody decided they had to go other places. So I didn't have anybody. So I assembled my own team out of some reservists. There were a good number of army reservists who were working in the civil affairs area. These were computer programmers and teachers and administrators, civilians who'd been called up and put on a uniform and they were looking for a job in Baghdad. They had equipment, transportation, weapons and no job. I had a job and none of the other things. So it was a nice match up.

Q: I take it at this point, John, security wasn't, this was a place you could walk around in.

LIMBERT: Pretty much. We drove around in unarmored humvees. I can remember being stuck in a traffic jam one time, one or two cars, there were people with weapons with me but it was pretty symbolic. I didn't wear a flak jacket. I wore civilian clothes, deliberately. The camouflage image, that was not the image that you wanted to project. I can remember sitting in a traffic jam one time, in some downtown Baghdad street. The guy in the car next to me rolls down his window, "Hello, how are you? Glad to see you here." And I said, "Who should run the new government?" And he says, "Not Chalabi! He big crook!"

As chaotic as things were and as primitive as our own living conditions were, at least we could move around. We found some restaurants, we went to peoples' houses. Because of these civil affairs people, I had my own transportation. That was a big problem for a lot of my colleagues, because they couldn't get to where they needed to go. They were dependent on the military bureaucracy for transportation, which then said, put in a request four days in advance, fill out these forms in triplicate, maybe it'll be ready, maybe it won't. "Tell us where you want to go and give us the grid coordinates." The State Department doesn't work with grid coordinates. It says, "I want to go to the ministry of something or other."

So there were a lot of problems there, but as I said, I had my own group. The other thing I brought to the table was a satellite phone, because that was the only method of communication. Satellite phones were great for outgoing calls, but they're hard for incoming calls but it was what we had.

Anyway, I went the museum the second day, accompanied by this group of reservists. There were U.S. forces in the compound at the museum, providing protection, so the place was secure. The people at the museum showed me around. There'd been a lot of cosmetic damage: desks smashed, windows smashed, walls broken, light fixtures broken, this kind of thing, but in terms of damage to the collection, it was hard to tell exactly.

My first impressions were two: one, hire a bunch of guys with brooms and you could get the place spiffied up. The second problem, more basic, was demoralization. These people were demoralized, so they couldn't get people with brooms. I did give them a hundred bucks from my own pocket, to move some paintings from one building to another for protection. If I had some more money, I could have given them some money so they could go out and hire people, but at that point they were so demoralized they didn't even have the ability to do that. A lot of the damage was psychological.

Q: Did you get, then or at any time, sit down with Iraqis and figure out who was doing the damage and what motivated them?

LIMBET: That was not the first issue. We all had theories. The first issue was to figure out what happened. What was the situation? Was it as bad as they said it was originally? Was it not so bad at all? And then, what to do about it? What were the needs? In terms of tracing back who did this and why, I think that was down the list of priorities.

Q: While you were making this initial investigation, was the press around?

LIMBERT: It certainly was. A lot of the press was there, including even some Iranian press. It was fun to talk to them.

Q: In many ways, the press is a bypass around an over controlling administration, or not?

LIMBERT: There were plenty of people willing to help, down to Japanese schoolchildren, who all apparently as part of their curriculum study about ancient Mesopotamia, the Sumerians and the Akkadians and the Babylonians, so they were all willing to help. People from New Zealand were willing to help. Everybody was willing to help.

That wasn't the issue. The issue was: are we serious about the responsibility that we've taken on, because we've taken on responsibility for this country and this society and are we serious about it? And the message that the Iraqis received in those first days and weeks was we're not serious about doing this. If we were serious, the first thing we would have done was to ensure security and we didn't do that. Not only didn't we do it, we sent the message that we didn't think it was important.

Q: So what were you doing? Let's take the first couple of days.

LIMBERT: Okay, so I went to the museum. They gave me the tour of the museum. I met the people there. I made a first evaluation, what the situation was. As near as I could discover, there was no inventory of what was gone, of what was damaged, and what safe. Of course the people at the museum, as you would expect, were very suspicious of me and of us. This was an area that some of the less experienced people in our group, some of the ideologues, never caught on to. The Iraqis were not going to welcome foreigners into their country with open arms. "Yes, thank you very much. You got rid of the dictator, now please leave." Why they should trust me with their secrets or the status of their operation?

So part of it was to attempt to build a certain level of trust and confidence. No, I was not here to fire them. No, I was not here to overturn everything that they had done. No, I was not here to ridicule them. No, I was not here to give orders to them.

There were things they needed to get the museum back in operation. I brought them some cell phones. I looked around for some sources of money for rebuilding, and for expertise. Who out there could I make contact with, to reestablish their contacts with the outside world, because under Saddam part of Iraq's problem was its isolation. It was difficult for Iraqis to travel, it was difficult for them to make contact with the outside world.

But in terms of what was where, the Iraqis were a bit cagey about that. I'm not sure that they showed me everything. I frankly don't blame them. I probably would have done the same thing.

At least, then, I could give it my best shot in terms of what the situation on the ground was. We did it via hotmail.

Q: An email

LIMBERT: A laptop. The military had set up communication. I sent a hot mail message back to a contact at the embassy in Kuwait, who then reformatted it as a reporting cable. It was all unclassified. This was cultural affairs. I tried to get one of those messages out about every day, because I knew people back here were groping for information. I tried to let them know, "Here's what's going on out here, here's my best view of it."

So that was the museum.

Q: You say "museum." Now, was there essentially one museum? What was the sort of cultural/museum structure?

LIMBERT: That's a good question. Actually, as I told you earlier, I wasn't sure that there even was a ministry of culture or where it was. But the first day, as we were driving with some of my military friends to the museum, I passed a building with a sign which read in Arabic "Ministry of Culture." So I said, "Okay, let's go back and check this place out." After the museum we went to the ministry of culture.

Well, the ministry of culture of was gone. It had been attacked by what were referred to as the Ali Babas, from Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. There were more than forty in this case. If this was the ministry that I was supposed to go into in my suit and my brief case, it was not going to happen. The furniture was gone, the windows were gone, the electric fixtures were gone, the pipes were gone, the toilets, the sinks, office supplies, typewriters, paper, pens. Nothing. Stripped to the walls. The interesting thing was, even after they'd stripped it to the walls, these guys, they came back and found other things to strip away. It was like that terrible Zero Mostel line, "They raped Thrace thrice."

Q: This is from A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.

LIMBERT: So they kept coming back. Whatever they missed before, they came again and there was nothing stopping them. There was no protection on that building. None. While I was there some of the employees showed up and of course, what was their concern: "Do I have a job? Will I get paid? What can I do?" Either that day or the next I asked as many people as could get there to come and what I told them was, "Don't come here! It's not safe!" Remember, about 65 per cent of the Iraqi civil service workers were women. I said, "I don't think it advisable either for you to be traveling in the streets or to come to this building, because this building isn't safe. It's not safe for you to be here in the building!"

Gradually I made contact with some of the second and third tier, office directors, directors general of the various parts of the ministry, to see what we could do. We created an executive committee to see what we could put back together. Well, the first thing we had to do was to say, "Okay, where can we reconstitute the ministry? The central ministry building is a total loss. Where can we go?"

And that's where things got very interesting, because then I started visiting the various buildings that belonged to the ministry. There was something called the Iraqi House of Fashion, which sounds like an oxymoron, but it had been a place where Iraqi designers had created and exhibited fashions. I guess the idea was to try to foster local talent, instead of using European designs.

Q: I recall seeing pictures of Saddam modeling these fashions, looking very elegant.

LIMBERT: I think the thing had basically collapsed after '91, after the first Gulf War and the sanctions, because their ability to get imported fabrics and other things had ended. They had had models there, they had exercise rooms where the models worked out, they had design studios, they had cutting rooms. It was quite an operation.

They took me to a handicrafts school, and they took me to a music center. Very interesting places. I went to the national library, it was called the "National Library and Documentation Center". I got there, this was on day two or day three and the scene at the hospital I told you about was repeated. I got to the library, which was downtown and as I got there, there was a shoving match going on between some officials from the previous regime and Shiite groups from around the neighborhood, as to who was going to be in charge. Well, eventually the previous officials took off, disappeared from the scene and I ended up dealing with other group.

Although the library building had been seriously damaged in the looting, the book collection was safe, and had been put somewhere under protection. But the library building itself, like the hospital, had turned into a political battleground over who was going to control it. Was it going to be these technocrats from the Baathi regime or was it going to be a new operation dominated by the Shia. The people I dealt with, one was a man in civilian dress, another was a man in clerical dress.

I should explain, also, in the interests of full disclosure, with my own background with Iran, my reaction to seeing these Shia clergy at first was not very favorable. The way they explained it to me was as follows: "We are believers in democracy." My experience with them in Iran was, whatever they were, they were not democrats. Then one of them said something very interesting. He said, "Look, what's this new Iraq going to be? If it's a democracy, then we, the Shia, 65 per cent of the population, should be the dominant force. If it isn't a democracy, we should still be the dominant force, because it's now our turn. We've been on the bottom for a long time. Now it's our turn to be on the top." And that was the way they looked at it.

So the national library was one place. There was something called the manuscript center, and I ran into the head of it. The head of the national documentation center was a Kurd descended from members of a Dervish order, very large, important Dervish order, with important connections inside of Iran, in the Kurdish area. It just so happens that my wife's family is from Iranian Kurdistan. So I could establish connections with these people. I said, "You know, I think we may be related to each other." And it turned out that we knew a lot of the same people from across the border, because his relatives were in fact major sheiks, major spiritual leaders, of a large, important Sufi order.

He and his wife ran this manuscript center and they had moved their manuscript collections to what he called a "shelter." I thought some basement somewhere. No, it was a real bomb shelter. So we went out to this place and it was a real bomb shelter. It has these big heavy steel doors. We talked to the local people out there and I said, "Do you think these things are safe out here?" They said, "Yeah, I think we are." I said, "Do you need any American help to safeguard these things?" Their immediate reaction was, "No, no, no, anything but that! We can do it."

My routine was, gather the military folks, and go to the different pieces under the ministry of culture. You never knew what you would find. You'd start out think you were going to do a, b, and c. You would end up doing a, d and z, because every place you would go to there would be a surprise or a crisis.

I did my best to get the flavor of these places back to the State Department. If the State Department was ever going to play its proper role in all these things, I figured it should know about it.

Q: I want to ask whether your group was getting together and sharing stories at the end of the day and whether coherence coming out of this?

LIMBERT: I wish I could say yes, but that was a huge weakness, a huge problem.

When we went into Baghdad on the 23rd of April, my responsibility was cultural affairs. No one knew whether there was a ministry of culture. It turned out that there was and it covered all kinds of things. The museum was the best known piece of it, but even the museum came under a department of archeology and antiquities within the ministry. Then there was a music school, there was the fashion house that I talked about, there was a tourism bureau, there was a bureau of Kurdish culture, there were handicrafts, all kinds of things going on. As I discovered in my wanderings, it was very clear that if we were going to reconstitute the ministry or at least put a rump staff together, it had to have a place to work and the ministry building was such a wreck, it wasn't usable, it wasn't safe. So I met with the people from the ministry, who talked about possibilities. One was the Fashion Center, one was what was called the Publication Center.

The Publication Center was about ten miles out in the suburbs, out away from town, quite a lovely little compound. They had a small villa out there which could be offices. Then they had printing presses and printing supplies. This place had not been touched by the looting. We went out there. It was very clear that this would not be a good place to set up a ministry office, because it was too far away and the offices were very small.

But there was another issue, which was that this place had state of the art Heidelberg printing presses, plus very expensive ink and paper, which they had been using to print glossy magazines about antiquities, about museums, about archeological sites, about painters and sculptors and so forth. Maybe the good thing about a dictatorship, is if they decide to do something they'll spare no expense.

The presses, in fact, were still sitting in their crates, had not been unpacked and had not been set up. There must have been 15, 20 million dollars worth of stuff at this center, completely unguarded and not touched. Well, when I started going out there, the place had been visited by some Shia militia groups, including groups connected with our friend Muqtada al-Sadr. The first visits had been friendly, but the people told me out there that the visits were getting less and less friendly. When I went out there, after about the third time, they said, "We don't know how long we can keep these people out." I saw a poster that they had been forced to put up in the window which basically said, "What the hawza wants, the hawza gets." Hawza is the Shiite theological center. So, "What the seminary wants, the seminary gets." In other words, "We're coming after this place."

Well, the last thing, it seemed to me, that we wanted to happen was for some very unfriendly people to have access to all of this printing equipment, which would have given them tremendous power. All right, what to do? I went back to our headquarters in the Green Zone and explained the situation to our military colleagues, emphasizing the necessity of getting some protection on this facility to keep our Shiite friends away. I found them completely uninterested. Blank looks. So the next thing I did, I went back there and I asked, "Where's the nearest American military unit?" It was in a little town about half a mile up the road. So I went there and I found a platoon camped in a school and I found the platoon leader, explained the situation to him and he got it immediately. He said, "Of course. This is obviously very important. I'll put some people there, but I don't know how long we're going to be in this area. We may get orders to pull out." I said, "Okay, as an expedient, put some people there and maybe I can get someone back in the palace to listen." Never did. They could not have cared less about this and the set up was such there was nowhere to go, there was no structure that said, "Okay, if you're frustrated at this level, go to the next level." There was no next level.

Q: Was this a problem with the military, along with Garner's organization, was that it, or the military didn't have the structure?

LIMBERT: Nobody had the structure. The military had its own structure to do what it did, but there was no structure to get us working together.

Q: How about civil affairs?

LIMBERT: Civil affairs, they listened to civil affairs about as much as they listened to me. Civil affairs and I, we were working together. They provided my transportation, my security, everything else. They had no more luck than I did. Plus, they didn't have the rank. Nobody was listening to them.

Q: Was this arrogance on the part of the military leaders, stupidity? I'm throwing out adjectives. I'm not judging.

LIMBERT: The one thing I'm very cautious about doing is imputing motives to people for their actions. I don't know what the motives were. I sensed there was a leadership breakdown, where no one had established priorities and no one had come in and said, "This is the way we're going to do it!" The high-ranking military people there did not come from a civil affairs background, or the kind of background that would have let them figure out what was going on. That was, as I said, not the case with the combat arms captains and first lieutenants that I met, who picked this stuff up immediately.

For example, somebody said to me, "Couldn't you take this through Garner's office?" I said, "Sure, I could asked to see Garner." But his staff arrangement was so bad it would have taken four days to get a meeting. I would have been better off ambushing him in the hallway, try to set up a meeting. And even if I did, there's no guarantee that he could make anything happen. He didn't have any troops, he didn't have staff, so all he could do is go talk to somebody. There's no guarantee that would be effective, either.

Q: One looks at our World War II experience, we had the OMGUS organization which was set up in order to take over until things got going. It was basically civil affairs, but it was completely integrated into the Supreme Headquarters. There was nothing of this nature.

LIMBERT: No, I think part of the problem was that what planning there was was wildly unrealistic. We believed that we were going to be there for only sixty days. No one thought that they needed to do any kind of staff work or set up any structures where one side could interact with the other.

Q: Also, was there no interest in civilians on the part of the military at the top level?

LIMBERT: Again, I wasn't working at the top level.

Q: This was Rumsfeld and he wasn't going to have

LIMBERT: I'm sure there was that disdain at the top level and it reached down to keeping some of the better informed out of Iraq, keeping them out of the operation. And I'm sure that attitude trickled down through the system. But I can't say specifically where this came from. I know it was a source of great frustration for Garner himself. He had no ability to organize what he knew he needed to organize, which was some kind of shadow civil administration.

The end of the story at the publication center, actually, is an interesting one. I'll just skip ahead a second. So, unable to get any interest at the headquarters, I found, what so often happens in these cases. The people concerned themselves were able to find a very elegant solution: one of the officials at the publications center was married to a Kurdish woman who was connected to the Barzani organization. So the next time I went back, the Americans were gone, but there were about thirty or forty Kurdish militiamen, with their characteristic baggy pants and cummerbunds, guarding the place.

This struck me as a perfectly elegant and workable solution. It got me off the hook. I didn't have to bang my head against the kind of obstinacy that I found back at headquarters.

Q: Were you seeing, as you got into this, that particularly the Sunni-Shia equation was going to really screw things up in your field?

LIMBERT: Oh, yeah. It was very clear that all was not harmony and there were an awful lot of grudges out there to settle. Every day, wherever I went, I would get letters of denunciation. Iraqis would slip me letters of denunciation, denouncing one of their coworkers or colleagues and telling me what an awful person he was and all the awful things that he had done. What possible action could I take? There was no chain of command, no authority. I was it. I could read about some guy and hear what a bad person he was, but there was nothing to be done about it. We were operating out in the air. But it was very clear the long term prospects for effective operation were pretty poor, because all these scores had to be settled.

Q: Did you have any counterparts or was there a cadre forming around you of Iraqis, to try to get things done?

LIMBERT: Yeah, there were. We organized and I think others did the same thing in the ministries they were responsible for, we organized a steering committee. And basically it was mostly old mid-level Baathi officials who'd been running the ministry before. I got a good interpreter from the State Department to come in and we would meet about once a week and organize that steering committee into committees: a committee to find a new place, a committee to get people paid, a committee to trace missing antiquities, whatever it was. It all looked good on paper and all sounded good, but without money and backing for this thing it was hard to see that this was actually going to go anywhere and do anything.

What saved me, in some ways, was being connected with my civil affairs colleagues, who, for example, arranged a helicopter trip from Baghdad up to Mosul for me and the head of the antiquities department, so that he could visit his employees up there, go the Mosul museum. We went to some of the Assyrian sites in that part of the country and got an idea of what was going on on the ground. He could show that in fact some organization still existed and could get his people paid, get them information. That one area, again, thanks to the civil affairs colleagues, that we could come up with something concrete and say, "We're actually doing something for you."

Q: Let's talk about the two areas. In the Kurdish area and all, that was, Nineveh is up there, isn't it?

LIMBERT: No, Mosul is not Kurdish. Mosul is Arabic and it's the heartland of Arab nationalism, Sunni Arab nationalism and Arabism inside Iraq. The Kurdish area, even then it was its own, they were doing their own thing.

Q: They had things pretty well under control, did they, or not?

LIMBERT: The Kurds did. Essentially they had been autonomous for twelve years already.

Q: What about the British side? Did that impact on you?

LIMBERT: Not at all.

Q: Did you have a counterpart down there?

LIMBERT: We had a British general, Tim Cross, who sat next to Garner. He was very good.

Q: But in sort of the cultural field?

LIMBERT: There were British people in the ORHA system, but I didn't have any of them working with me.

Q: I would have thought, the British Museum has got this magnificent Mesopotamian collection and I would have thought that you would have people from the British Museum all over you, coming there to look for their treasures.

LIMBERT: We had visitors come out. I don't remember if we had a British Museum person. We had McGuire Gibson from Chicago and somebody from Michigan, who came out. They knew the people at the Iraq museum and they knew what to look for. So they went to the museum. But they were restricted, where they could go in the country. The people from the museum were getting out, although when a couple of them, while trying to get to London, drove to Jordan and halfway there they got held up by some bandits on the road. The bandits, not knowing these people were from the museum, said, "Give us your antiquities!" Not "Give us your money" but "Give us your antiquities!" They said, "We don't have any antiquities, but we do have money." "Okay, we'll take your money." So they took their money and sent them on their way.

Q: We'll all read about looting the museums and all. By the time you got there, what was, as you saw it, the actual situation and how did it evolve while you were there?

LIMBERT: Objects started coming back. As I mentioned, we didn't know what the actual situation was and the Iraqis were being cagey about it. I don't blame them. Why should they open up to me?

Q: They'd been looted before, by people just like you.

LIMBERT: Oh, exactly and they were not sure of our motives. So what I did was, I tried to establish a scholar-to-scholar relation with the head of the antiquities department. His specialty was this Hatra civilization, the late Roman, civilization in northern Iraq. We talked about that.

One was to build some trust. Two, to safeguard what was not looted, like the printing center, like the manuscript house, whatever else there was. Three was to get stolen objects back. It was interesting, because a lot of stuff started appearing. People were bringing things back, because there was an amnesty/buy back program that existed under Iraqi law. So if you had an antiquity and you brought it in, they paid you the equivalent of a hundred dollars or two hundred dollars, no questions asked, depending on what it was. Well, a Sumerian head might be worth $150,000 on the world market, but sitting in your house in Baghdad it's a paperweight, it's not worth a damn. In the meantime, you desperately need cash to feed your family. So people started bringing the stuff back.

The other thing that happened, at least in the case of the Shiite mosques, the Shiite imams told people that these items were haram, that they were stolen goods and therefore anything you bought with them was haram, was not suitable. You couldn't buy clothes with it, the clothes you bought were unclean. The food you might buy using the proceeds from it were unclean. That meant a lot to most people.

So that was a big effort, to get the stuff back. Other stuff was found at checkpoints. So things were drifting back. Also, the losses turned out not to be as bad as we thought, because the people in the museum had safeguarded some stuff.

Q: I would imagine that jewels and gold and stuff like that had been tucked away in safes.

LIMBERT: There was a treasure which was rumored to be put for safekeeping in the vault underneath the central bank in downtown Baghdad. The central bank in downtown Baghdad was a wreck. It had been bombed. There was flooding in the basement. There was no electricity. In comes National Geographic magazine in all of its might and National Geographic magazine announces that it is going to pay for cleaning out the basement of the central bank, pumping out the water and opening the vault. And I said, "No, you're not! If you open the vault and you see the stuff, you find that the rumored treasure is there, what are you going to do with it? Who does it belong to? Who are you going to turn it over to? You can only do that when somebody sits down and decides."

Well these guys apparently had made their connections, either inside the U.S. military or inside the ORHA organization, dealing with a powerful entity here. But at least for a while we were able to stop it. I don't know what happened eventually but I said, "Before you open this stuff, you have to clarify what you're going to do after you open it."

There was a lot of hustling going on there, a lot of freelancing, but much of the stuff had been taken out and safeguarded before the war. So it was gradually becoming clear that the losses were not necessarily as bad as many thought. There was a lot of cosmetic damages, places smashed and so forth but in terms of the loss of items from the collections in the museum, maybe it wasn't so bad. But of course without an inventory how do you know?

Q: Was there word put out, somewhere, to all the museums in the world, "keep your eye out for this, don't take anything reported" and all that? I would assume that would be

LIMBERT: Yeah, the idea is you don't buy anything of Mesopotamian provenance, 'cause you assume it's stolen goods. You got word out to U.S. Customs, to UNESCO, saying this is an emergency, you have to stop this trade. But of course as I learned there's also an underground trade. I also learned that there is a huge fight in the world of people who run museums and scholars. Apparently the two cannot stand each other.

Q: How did that play out for your

LIMBERT: Oh, I would hear from both sides and I would hear about how bad the other side was.

Q: During the time you were doing this, how much were you on your own and how much was at least something trickling through the Pentagon, the State Department, Garner's office, as far as instructions?

LIMBERT: Zero. We were OTF, out there flapping. It was what we could do. In a way that was good and that was bad. It was good in a sense I was there, I made the decision on what had to be done but some of the so-called help and support you really didn't want, because people had their own ideas on how things should be, like the guys from National Geographic or some of the military people who dealt with Iraqis in a somewhat different way, not a very effective way. A lot of that was going on.

But basically State Department was not a player. The best I could do, the best all of us could do, was to keep our colleagues in Washington informed of what was going on. But they had zero influence over events.

Q: What about this group of Iraqi exiles

LIMBERT: The Chalabi crowd?

Q: At the beginning, these were the darlings of the Pentagon and the people who were running things from there. I would have thought they would want to get into what you were up to.

LIMBERT: They were around but they were looking to take positions, take influence, take money, take power. That game is played at a different level.

Q: So you didn't have young men with London ties coming around and checking your premises, or whatever?

LIMBERT: No. I had some guy show up, he showed up from Washington, an Iraqi. He came in as though he was going to be in charge of everything. He came in with a very odd way of operating. He wasn't going to listen to any of the Iraqis, what they were saying. He knew everything, he knew how to do it. He and I clashed very quickly and I finally said, "I'm sorry, but you're going to have to find another part of this organization to work in. With this attitude, we can't work together." He wasn't a Chalabite.

Q: Was he sponsored by anyone?

LIMBERT: I don't know. He just showed up. People were just showing up. Where they came from, who sponsored them, who they were, that was part of the whole problem. He just came in and announced himself to me one day.

Q: Well to put this whole thing into context, because as we're talking now, what is it, four years later, people are shooting at each other, bombs are going off. At that point we're really talking about a real sort of postwar situation. Security wasn't a problem particularly. It was more the reconstruction, wasn't it?

LIMBERT: Security had broken down. Essentially there was no security in Baghdad. We had reasonable security but I would not have wanted to have been an Iraqi at that point. There was no safety. You had no guarantee of your safety. For us, we still had some prestige as the victors. So we used to go to restaurants, occasionally would go out to the market to buy some things, went even to some peoples' homes for dinner. When I traveled around, we went around in unarmored humvees. I had my security detail, but it was mostly for show and very helpful for that reason. But, no, the security situation then was much better than it is now.

Q: Did you have an American staff?

LIMBERT: No. It was me. I tried. I got, when I was in Kuwait I worked with some of the other, younger officers that groomed along, Foreign Service people. I remember with one officer, we visited the Kuwait Museum, we talked to some of the cultural people there. But they disappeared on me. They went to other places and, again, when I mentioned I didn't think this was necessarily the best idea, I was told to sit down and shut up.

Q: Now Garner, he was no longer really a contact point there?

LIMBERT: He was, but as I said, there was no staff organization then, so that the only way really to talk to him was to run into him by accident in the hallway. If he wanted something done, there was no staffing arrangement for that to get done. He couldn't say to somebody, "You go out and take care of this." The military, the Central Command people, who had the troops, frankly, weren't paying any attention to him.

So every Iraqi that he met said, "Sir, we have to stop the looting and restore security." That was conveyed to Central Command people, who basically said, "We're not interested."

Q: How long were you there, now?

LIMBERT: I was there, that first go around, I was in Kuwait for about a month and then on the ground in Iraq for about a month.

Q: While you were in Iraq, was there a chance to get together with colleagues, either from the Garner group or elsewhere, sit around and exchange ideas or did you have anybody to deal with?

LIMBERT: We had a group core senior Foreign Service people: myself, Tim Carney, Dave Dunford, Barbara Bodine. We knew each other so well and had been through so much we really didn't have to say much to each other. We knew what was going on. Usually Carney, Dunford and myself would have dinner together every day, or MRE's together.

Q: Carney was finance, wasn't he?

LIMBERT: No, Carney was industry and Dunford was foreign affairs. But there was a larger group, the so called civil administration module, was supposed to meet once a day. As I mentioned, the first head of it was very ineffective. He was sent out within I think a week after the arrival in Baghdad. Robin Raphel tried to get control of the thing. In the meantime it had grown to about fifty people, so you can imagine how productive those meetings were. If you wanted to raise an issue you couldn't do it. There was no way.

The other thing we lacked of course was any structure to sit down and talk out common, look for common approaches to common problems. For example, when I started running into Shiite clergy looking to take over pieces of the ministry of culture, such as the library and the documentation center, I wanted to put that to my colleagues and say, "Look, here's what's happening. Anything similar happening to you? What did you do about it? Anything to suggest?" Couldn't do it. The structure didn't exist.

We also had a gentleman there who had been head of USAID at one point. All I can remember is his sitting in our meetings and making these long and ponderous speeches, of no relation to anything to conditions on the ground but by the time we got through that there was no time to do anything productive.

Q: Obviously, when you have a war, this is a great time for the foreign correspondent of every news organization. Now, were they sniffing around? Were they still there and were they going after you and how

LIMBERT: They were after everybody. The ones I remember, Rajiv Chandrasekaran from the Washington Post was very good, Patrick Tyler for the New York Times was there, I think Max Rosenbaum from the Economist was there. They were all there.

Q: Could they play any role, get your message to them that then would go to the Times or the Post or something that would then be reflected back, so the Pentagon would have to react and that?

LIMBERT: I don't think the Pentagon cared at that point. Whoever was in charge of this thing was in his own world and was pretty impervious to.

Q: The problem with Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz and maybe Vice President Cheney, this is a hell of a mess.

LIMBERT: They're too far away.

Q: This is an inside the Beltway thing.

LIMBERT: When you're in Baghdad you have more immediate problems. You've got to get transport, you've gotta get protection, you gotta this project taken care of, you've gotta get some money. That's not a Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz issue. The one place where I must say I just about lost my cool was with my colleagues at the State Department.

What happened was this: when I first was asked to go, I was asked by an official from the Near East bureau. I said, "Okay, but have you talked to the Africa bureau?" I was serving in an Africa bureau post. He said, "No." I said, "You do it, you talk to the Africa bureau, make sure you do." "Okay." I don't know if he ever did, but I also went back to the Africa bureau and said, "Here's what's going on. You give the okay, because I still work for you." "Okay, go ahead." I said, "They told me I'm going there for six weeks and then I'm coming back." So I get there and six weeks go by, seven weeks go by, so forth. The Africa bureau tells me, "Oh, we didn't think you were going back." My tour is supposed to be up a few months after this.

The Africa bureau had approached my successor, this is like April or May, saying, "Can you go out early as ambassador to Mauritania?" Never told me. When I found that out, I just about lost it and I said, "By the way, my wife is still living there. What is she supposed to do?" I'm still the chief of mission out there and I can't go back. I felt like I'd had a knife put in my back. This is from your colleagues.

This is more immediate stuff. What Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Feith, all those guys, do, they do. They are what they are. But what your friends do to you, your colleagues do to you, is much more painful.

Q: After your month or so there, did you see any progress in your field?

LIMBERT: No, I did not. I did what I could. You do what you can, made the contacts that I could, tried to get things going. I can't say that I was seeing any terrible progress.

What happened, I was physically and mentally exhausted, this kind of thing going on day after day. I was hitting a wall. I knew I had to get out of there. The Department basically washed their hands and they said, "Well, that's fine but you should stay." I said, "You should find a successor." They said, "Not us."

So there was a very nice civil servant in the ORHA organization who said, "Oh, I know who can replace you. The Italians" who were then in the coalition "they want to send somebody out to do culture and their specialty, they're very good at museums and restoration." So they found a retired Italian ambassador who was willing to come out.

So I flew out to Kuwait saying all kinds of prayers for the salvation of this nice Italian man. We met in Kuwait at the Italian ambassador's house there. He went in and did a very good job. But had it hadn't been for him and for the American civil servant who found him, the State Department would have been perfectly happy to leave me hanging there forever.

Q: So what happened? You left there when?

LIMBERT: I left there in late May of 2003.

Q: And then what'd you do?

LIMBERT: I went back to Mauritania. Nouakchott had never looked so good. I was about twenty pounds thinner. I briefed the embassy staff. I called on the Mauritanian president, briefed him and the officials that I saw as to what was going on.

Q: When you're briefing the Mauritanian president, did you tell him the screwed up mess the Americans had made?

LIMBERT: I didn't use quite those words. No, no, I was more professional than that. But with my colleagues in the embassy I was pretty blunt. I said, "This is not going well." I'll never forget, I told one of my colleagues who was a first tour officer, had been an army or marine captain before joining the Foreign Service, very good officer. I told him the story about how the people at the first lieutenant, captain grade were so smart and so good and so resourceful and how they seemed to lose that characteristic as they went higher in rank and he said, "Yes, what you found is something that's common knowledge in the military. To become a full colonel, you have to have a lobotomy before you get there."

I certainly saw a lot of that on the ground. It's not fair. There were good people there, but in general the level of understanding at the lower officer ranks was much, much higher.

As I said, I briefed the people at the embassy, I briefed the Mauritanian government. I also did a press event, describing what had happened, because, of course, as I showed you, while I was away the Mauritanian press had printed a story saying I was going to be in charge of religious affairs and I wanted to disabuse them of that as quickly as I could. That story was picked up by the Washington Post.

Colin Powell was the one who announced that I was going to be in charge of restoring the Iraq Museum back to its pristine condition. Even while I was talking to the Department, they first said, "We want you to head commerce." Then they said, "No, the ministry of planning," "No, the ministry of this, the ministry of that." Somehow that story that Garner wanted to me to do religion got picked up. The Post picked it up and then the local Nouakchott paper picked it up.

In my press events and briefing the government I did not use the same colorful language that I've used with you, but I hadn't been there long and I thought, "It's nice to be back in this peaceful place where nothing ever happens." I got back around the 23rd, 24th, 25th of May, somewhere like that. Two o'clock in the morning of the 8th of June, we were woken up to heavy machine gun fire and tank fire next door. There was a coup going on.

I thought I've got three or four months to go, I'll get some projects wrapped up, I'll get things ready for my successor, have a lot of farewell parties

Q: Before we get to the coup, when you came back, what was the report you were getting from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania? How did our attack on Iraq play out in the time you were gone?

LIMBERT: It was very much as predicted. Before the attack we had gone to the host governments in many Islamic countries and asked what will be the reaction to such an event and uniformly the answer was, "We know you're going to do it anyway, but if you do it, do it quickly and get out. If you can do it quickly and get out, you'll be okay. If this thing drags on the consequences will be unpredictable and could be difficult."

So when I got out in May, it was still early in the season. You put the best face on it. One of the reporters asked me, "Are you embarrassed by the fact that you didn't find any weapons of mass destruction?" I said, "No, not in the least, look at what a horrible regime this was, look at the mass graves that we found, look at the evidence of brutality and torture that we found, at the genocide that we found, so forth and so on." That worked for a while. I think that approach probably would have worn thin after a time. I was not there, for example, for Abu Ghraib. That broke in 2004.

Q: This was the prison and abuse of prisoners and

LIMBERT: Just an absolute disgrace. Complete failure of command. Complete failure of leadership. I would not have wanted to have been in Mauritania then. I don't know how I could have dealt with those events in that country. There really is no way to do it.

Q: What was this coup all about?

LIMBERT: I never found out. All we knew was that a group of disgruntled army officers had taken control of the Mauritanian armored brigade and about one or two in the morning on June 8th had attacked the presidential palace, which was separated from the embassy by a dirt alley about as wide as this room.

Q: About twelve feet.

LIMBERT: We lived in the embassy, both my wife and I and the DCM and his wife. So we had what you might call a rude awakening that morning.

Q: What did you do? Get under the bed?

LIMBERT: We got on the floor and then started calling around to try to find out what was going on and tried to do as much as we could. You do the standard stuff, make sure nobody moves anywhere, everybody stands fast. Everybody's heard it, obviously. Everybody wasn't as close as we were. We told people to stay away. Then we hunkered down, found out as much as we could and hoped for the best, hoped the shooting stayed away from us, because the rebels had old Soviet tanks, given to the Iraqis to the Mauritanians, but they were quite effective. If they had come in our direction we would have been in deep trouble.

Q: What happened?

LIMBERT: What happened was there was shooting and fighting all through the day. The president, whose residence was in this compound, got word of what was happening. Somebody called ahead and said, "There are tanks in the street." He and his family got out, made their escape out a back door and he ended up in some headquarters, directing the resistance. Whoever was doing the coup apparently didn't have any particular plan. They didn't take the radio station, they didn't have any announcements, they didn't have any political program. Apparently it was just a grab for power within the larger Arab Mauritanian, called the "White Moor" community, a disgruntled clan or tribe or group of tribes who set this thing in motion and they had no plan beyond attacking the president. Eventually through the day the tide turned and about six o'clock at night the coup was over.

We had no particular information until the afternoon. There was just rumors. We had no communication, other than, we had email. The only communication we had was unclassified email, because our communicator could not get to the embassy in order to open the communications system. So we had telephone communications and email.

We also had, this was awful, we had a Foreign Service National employee, he was an Afro-Mauritanian. He had been an army officer and back in the Eighties had been imprisoned for seven years for plotting a coup. He will cheerfully admit that he was plotting a coup in fact. He was a very nice man, but he hated the current government, considered them responsible for his misfortune. I didn't know this at first, but he was feeding misinformation to our station chief and the station chief was sending this stuff, unedited, to Dakar, and Dakar was sending it, unedited, as finished intelligence back to Washington. It was all about how the coup makers were winning, the government had collapsed, they had lost and of course I didn't know about this until after.

I was just furious, with the Foreign Service National and with the station chief. I said, "You've gotta have better judgment than that." But he was just a young guy, ambitious, trying to make his mark and lost his judgment.

Anyway, by that evening the government forces had stopped the coup. They had basically found some antitank weapons, knocked out the tanks. The tide turned and by early the next morning it was all over. What was remarkable for many people was that although Mauritania had had a long tradition of military coups, they had never been violent or bloody. Usually the way of a Mauritanian coup is for the coup makers to drive up to the palace, walk in and say, "Okay, it's our turn now. We're taking over. Please leave." And the ex-president would drive away and go back into private life.

There were five or six ex-presidents there, all of whom had been toppled by coups and they were living quite peacefully in Nouakchott. One of them kept a herd of camels and sold the camel milk by the side of the road and made apparently quite a good living that way.

Q: There was no call on us to recognize anybody or do anything except to come by afterwards, with shell casings all over the palace and say, "Glad to see you're still there"?

LIMBERT: Exactly. There was a story, I think the second or third day we made contact with the European Command, in the thought that if this thing went on and an evacuation became necessary that we'd get a planning process started. So European Command sent a small advance team into Dakar. Well, the State Department, following some announcement that had come from the White House, of course never checking with us, announced that there are American forces in Dakar ready to go into Mauritania.

So I get a call from the president's office, saying, "Can you explain what is going on?" I said somebody screwed up. Eventually these guys did come up. The thing was over by that time, but they did come up, they did fly up to Nouakchott and they reviewed our evacuation plan, which was helpful.

But, no, afterwards, I think everyone, whether you liked the president or not, everyone was relieved that this thing failed, because nobody knew who these guys were. Were they pro-Islamist, were they Arab nationalists, were they something else? Nobody knew. They had no political platform.

Q: Well did they root them out?

LIMBERT: Eventually they found them. I don't think they executed anybody. They imprisoned them. Some of them fled.

Q: What about your Foreign Service National, the source of all the misinformation? Did you fire him?

LIMBERT: No, I didn't. Maybe I should have fired him, but he was doing what he did and if somebody believed him, that's not his fault. Again, I called in the chief of station and I said, "Listen, you have to use your judgment and realize he's feeding you stuff. You don't use single source reporting, you have to evaluate it, show it to somebody." If I fired anybody, it would have been the station chief. But he was a young guy. It was over, I didn't want to take that to the wall. Maybe I should have, but I didn't.

As far as the Foreign Service National, if we were willing to believe the garbage that he put out, shame on us.

Q: That was the end of your time there?

LIMBERT: That was June and then we left after the 4th of July, I think we ended up leaving in August 2003. One of my last official acts was to visit an area in the south of the country near the Sï¿½nï¿½gal River. It was the first place I had gone way back in 2001 when I first arrived, the most African part of Mauritania. Years and years ago USAID built, when USAID was doing such things, a bridge over a seasonal river there, the main road connecting the provincial capital to the rest of the country. Later on the seasonal rains had flooded out the bridge, so during the rainy season that road could be cut for maybe a week or even two weeks.

We had some money to rebuild the bridge. So I got very interested in this project, encouraged it and pushed it and finally, two weeks before I'm ready to leave I get word that the bridge is done. So we go down to inaugurate the bridge. My wife and I flew down to the provincial capital, we got picked up. It's a long drive, about a 12 hour drive down to this place. So we get to the bridge, there's a band, there's the local horses that they bring out, we have a big feast, there are big speeches. They show us the bridge. We then finished our trip, we go back to Nouakchott, we're getting ready to leave and I think about three or four days before I left I go over to the Peace Corps office to say goodbye to the people there and some of the volunteers. One of them pulls me aside and says, "Remember the bridge down there? Well, it rained. The bridge is gone."

It turned out that what was gone was the approaches to the bridge. But it's the classic do-gooder in Africa story: whatever you do, something's going to go wrong.

But it was a good tour. We still have a lot of good friends there. We had a good group at the embassy. I think morale was pretty high, given the conditions. I can't claim credit for this, but when I arrived, because of the cuts during the Clinton years, the embassy had fallen below critical mass, in terms of people and support. We were pretty much left without any people or any resources to do what we had to do. What we had to do was fairly limited, but there's a minimum level you need to do. Secretary Powell, to his great credit, had turned that around, immediately saw you couldn't treat your people in the field that way, you couldn't run the facilities that way. So now we had the people we needed, we had the facilities we needed.

We even were able to build a volleyball court, very nice grass volleyball court, inside the embassy compound. I'll never forget this, one day I was I was walking past the court and nobody was using it. I turned to somebody and said, "It's a shame nobody is using this court. It's such a nice court. We ought to make more use of it." The next day I'm in the compound and I see about ten people playing volleyball. So I went up and I said, "That's very nice. How does it happen you're playing volleyball?" They said, "Oh, we understand you gave orders that people will play volleyball two times a week." So it was a good lesson.

Q: How it was constituted at the time you took it and all?

LIMBERT: Okay, AFSA's the American Foreign Service Officers Association and it is a combination professional society and labor union for members of the Foreign Service. It has been in existence as a professional society back to the Twenties and in the Seventies, thanks to the efforts of some so-called "Young Turks" at the time, it organized itself into a union and won certification.

Q: How did you get into this job? Then we'll talk about what the issues were.

LIMBERT: I knew I was coming back to Washington. I had very little desire to go back into the State Department building. I had spent my career avoiding it, so I thought I should continue in that honorable tradition. But more than that, I liked the idea of doing something for the profession. I thought of it as payback. This was a profession that I had come to love over the course of my career. I thought it was a profession that's worth protecting, that does things worthwhile for our country and maybe for larger humanity. So the means we have to advance the profession and the conditions of our employees, many of whom, I saw, were very skilled and devoted people and very brave people, was through this association.

As an individual senior officer you can do things for maybe a handful of individuals but I thought within AFSA this a chance to take some of the principles, in terms of respect for people, respect for the profession and put them to work on a larger scale.

Q: You were doing this from when to when?

LIMBERT: I was elected in the spring of 2003. AFSA elects its officers, elects a president who's traditionally an active duty State Department person. It elects a series of vice presidents, one for each of the foreign affairs agencies. Those are all full time employees. According to the labor agreement that we have with the agencies, the president and the vice presidents are detailed to the organization. They continue to draw their salary, they remain in the Foreign Service, but they're detailed for the period they hold office. So there is a president, there is a vice president for State, there's a vice president for AID, a vice president for Commerce and a vice president for the Foreign Agricultural Service. There's a representative from the Board of Broadcasting, but we have very few Foreign Service people there, so that's a volunteer position.

Q: Now, to sort of spell it out, the Civil Service is not included in this?

LIMBERT: No, Civil Service is not. Civil Service in State is represented by at least two unions that I know of. One is the American Federation of Government Employees. The other is the Treasury employees' union, which represents Passport Agency employees. Others I think are represented by AFGE. But it's a little bit different, because you don't have the professional association aspect of it. Basically these are real bread and butter unions and look at issues affecting employees ranked at GS-9 and below. People above that are considered management employees, are not eligible to join a union.

The American Foreign Service Association is quite different. We have members all across the ranks. The Director General, for example, who is the chief management officer, and our chief adversary, if you like, is also a member of the union.

Q: This was during the period that Colin Powell was Secretary of State?

LIMBERT: That's right, Colin Powell was Secretary of State and the Foreign Service was enjoying a very flourishing relationship with the Secretary. Those were good times for the Foreign Service.

Q: I was going to say, how did you view Colin Powell at that time?

LIMBERT: I had seen what he had done for the Service even before I went to AFSA. Basically during the Nineties the Service had been starved to death, starved for people, starved for resources and as a result that hit morale quite hard. A lot of the missions in Africa, not just Nouakchott, were suffering. They couldn't take care of their people, they couldn't do what they had to do. They'd gone below critical mass.

Colin Powell came in, he looked at the State Department building, which was pretty shabby. He looked at our embassies, which were very shabby. He looked at our recruiting, at our staffing, which was inadequate to do what had to be done. He looked at our information technology, which was antiquated, to say the least. For example, our delegation to the UN was still using Wangs at that time, basically late Seventies or early Eighties technology.

He looked at that and with his background and his ideas from the military of leadership, he said, "this is unacceptable". So he had single handedly turned things around. It took that kind of leadership, a lot of personal leadership. You don't delegate that to an Under Secretary for Management.

For example, here at the Foreign Service Institute for years employees had wanted a child care facility here, because the State Department offers language training not only to employees but to adult family members. But for many people, child care was a big issue. People with small children couldn't take advantage of a very good opportunity. For years we had wanted to establish a child care center. It took his personal intervention to force the bureaucracy to act.

Bureaucracies are the same all over the world. It's much more comfortable for them to say, "No, that's too hard. We can't do it."

The other thing was he was able to persuade Congress to give him the money that he needed and he began to recruit above attrition, so we had large numbers of new junior officers join the Service. The problem was, of course, because we had not recruited adequately in the years before, we began to get a bulge at the bottom of the Service and a deficit in the mid grades of the Service.

Q: What were some of the issues that you became involved in?

LIMBERT: A lot of these were issues that, not having done anything like this before, were completely new to me. There are people in the Service who have dealt with these issues off and on, over their career, but these were new to me.

When I got there, a month or two into my tenure, we did an off-site for the officers, board members, and employees of AFSA and what we came up with was that our job number one, the overriding job, was to fix this discrepancy in what we call locality pay. For people that don't know, by a quirk in the law, government people who serve in the United States, depending on where they serve, receive something called locality pay, which may be anywhere from nine, perhaps 15, 20 per cent of salary not as a cost of living or a hardship allowance but as a salary scale equalizer, so that people doing comparable jobs, for example in San Francisco in the private sector, to make this competitive. And what had happened, in the original law, when a Foreign Service person went overseas that part of his salary was cut. Originally Washington, DC was a differential of nine per cent. By the time I got to AFSA, it was like 15, 16 per cent. So a person took a 15, 16 per cent cut in base pay when he went overseas.

For example, this affected the Thrift Savings Plan, this affected retirement. We did some calculations and what we found was, over a 25 year career of average assignments, a person was out about $250,000, including compound interest. So that was job number one.

Then we did all the member service issues. Typically disputes over allowances, disputes over household affects, disputes over schools, disputes over security clearances, all of these kinds of things we did. One of my favorite issues was, we looked to restore USAA membership for our non-State colleagues, because up until a few years before anyone in the Foreign Service was eligible to join USAA.

Q: USAA is the military officers' insurance.

LIMBERT: Originally it was, but it had expanded beyond officers to enlisted men and then to Foreign Service and other categories. It's not just insurance but also banking and financial advice. They have mutual funds. It's a good operation. The savings are considerable for most people.

Then there was a change of management at USAA and they decreed that only Foreign Service people from the State Department would be eligible to join USAA. Those from other agencies who'd joined earlier could remain members but they would not take any new members from AID, Commerce or Agriculture.

As you might guess, our colleagues were up in arms at this. This was one of the most frustrating experiences I'd ever encountered, probably ranks right up there with the Iraq Museum, because dealing with USAA, they were absolutely adamant and in my view completely pigheaded on the issue. Logic seemed to make no difference to them at all. How can one run a business by turning away good customers? Foreign Service people are pretty good risks, compared to the rest of the population. What business decision went into that policy is beyond me.

Q: Did you get any feel for what was driving this?

LIMBERT: Yes. We went all the way to the top of our agencies, including Secretary Powell, the Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Commerce, who all wrote letters on our behalf. They all got stiffed. They were all, including Secretary Powell, told to buzz off.

It was explained to me by one of the close associates of the Secretary that the new head of USAA was an idiot. He had some idea he learned from business school somewhere. I don't know what business school he'd gone to, maybe he'd gotten his degree over the internet. I'm not sure, but was just an idiot. Logic and reason had nothing to do with it. I wrote some very harsh letters to USAA because they kept coming up with new excuses. Every time they came up with one reason we would answer and then they would come up with something new. At the end of the day, they just weren't going to yield. Apparently, this new head of the organization had stacked the board with his own obedient people and they would do pretty much whatever he wanted.

Q: Did you get anywhere?

LIMBERT: No. We even sent one of our board members to the USAA annual meeting with some proxies, threatening to make an embarrassing speech on the floor. Impenetrable. Are you a Mel Brooks fan?

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: Remember Torquemada?

Q: History of the World? Yeah, vaguely.

LIMBERT: "Don't ask him for mercy, don't ask him to change his mind, don't ask Torquemada for mercy, don't ask Torquemada to change his mind." So it was the Torquemada approach.

Who was it, Schiller or Goethe, who said, "Against stupidity the gods themselves labor in vain"?

The other, very educational, piece of this job was doing congressional liaison. We had an excellent congressional liaison person, a gentleman who had worked on the Hill for about 15 years and then the representative he worked for retired and he joined AFSA. He gave me an education that was nothing like what I had learned in my American government classes, about the way Congress worked. I'll never forget, particularly on the locality pay issue, we were getting nowhere with Congress. And we would go to a meeting and in my mind we would just get slaughtered. "You Foreign Service people, you're pampered, always complaining, you're never satisfied, you're going to cocktail parties overseas." That kind of line, by the way, when I heard that, just really would set me off, given my own history. But we'd come out of the meeting and I'd be thinking we just had our heads handed to us and our expert would say, "That wasn't too bad. I think we made some progress."

Q: Did the issue of our involvement in Iraq come up?

LIMBERT: Not directly, because AFSA does not do policy. We are not consulted on policy. It's not in our agreements with the Department. The Department has to consult on certain issue and may consult on others, but policy is not among them. People in the Service and on the AFSA board have very strong views on Iraq, mostly negative, but not entirely so.

Where we did get involved was under conditions of service. This argument still goes on. In the middle of my service I got a request to go to Iraq for two or three months to do a special mission, and I had to drop everything and go. So it affected me personally. But the question was conditions of service and safety of our people. Not was the policy right or was the policy wrong, but how was it affecting the Foreign Service?

This debate continues and now the argument seems to be are we going to send only volunteers or are we going to have to go to forced assignments? One of the arguments we got into with the Department was: among the incentives to go to Iraq can you explicitly link Iraq service to promotions? AFSA, quite rightly, in my view, insisted no, you cannot. There is a precept for promotions about service under difficult and dangerous conditions. But if you start giving explicit special weight for service in one country we thought you would undermine the integrity of the whole Service. So we fought very hard for that. That did not make us popular with some people who thought that their service in Iraq should give them a leg up.

Q: How did Iraq fit with the way AFSA dealt with service in Vietnam? Were you looking at that as setting a precedent?

LIMBERT: Not really, because most of us weren't around at the time.

Q: I'm just wondering, though, as a precedent

LIMBERT: It didn't come up very much. In terms of dissent awards, we were certainly looking for dissenting messages, if they centered around Iraq. But they didn't, a lot. A lot of the dissent awards were over non-Iraq issues. There was one, I think, we gave on an Iraq issue but otherwise, no. There were those people who resigned over Iraq. I certainly admired their stand on principle.

You had to go at this by indirection, because we had no standing officially with the Department to say, "This [Iraq policy] is really a terrible idea. This is a screwed up operation." This was the Secretary's mission, Powell's number one priority and Rice's too. As a labor union you can't go in and say, "Well, your priority is wrong" even if you think it is.

So one of the things we did was to hammer the Director General's office over the number of people being assigned there under the dangerous conditions that existed and saying, "Look, is it necessary to send this many people into harm's way?" Of course, the answer was, "Well, we won't send anybody there unless we can adequately ensure his safety" which was a bunch of hogwash. We were building this monster embassy and, again, many of us questioned the need for such a huge mission there, which was going to be a larger target

Q: Yeah, if we're talking about eventually withdrawing and we have a huge embassy, it means that it'll be turned into the Hilton or something like that.

LIMBERT: If we're lucky. Perhaps it'll turn into a training target for al Qaeda terrorists. But, again, you had to go at that by indirection. In the back of everybody's minds, here was the thing: obviously people felt very strongly about Iraq policy, one way or the other

Q: Almost one way.

LIMBERT: Almost, but not entirely. We had some people who thought this was the right thing to do and should keep doing it. But in the back of our minds there is always what I used to call the "d word": decertification. The Bush administration was not friendly to public sector unions. Not friendly to any unions, but particularly public sector unions. We were watching what was going on with the unions at Homeland Security and the Defense Department, where the government had taken a very adversarial stance. It was clear this administration did not like the fact there was a strong union in the Foreign Service. About 75 per cent of Foreign Service employees are members of the union. It's really unusual in a federal department.

Q: Really? What about, say, Treasury or something?

LIMBERT: At Treasury, the percentages are much lower. For one thing, as I said, in the Civil Service people above a certain grade are not even eligible to join. We're up and down the system. Senior Foreign Service Officers are AFSA members.

At the back of their minds they considered us an annoyance, but they had to talk to us, under the law. They'd prefer not to. They would prefer we go away. They did not like us raising issues. They did not like us questioning the way things were being done. But there it was.

So, given a certain set of circumstances, the administration always had this "nuclear option" of decertifying us. This came up in another way, because there was in our budgeting discussions there was talk of "let's make State a 'security agency,' along with Defense."

In Congress State's budget is linked up with that of Commerce and Justice. It's a process that guarantees that State gets only the crumbs from the table. The thought was, if we become a "security agency" and link up with Defense and the intelligence agencies we'll do better at budget time. Well, maybe so but the problem there is that would expose AFSA to decertification, because if we were a "security agency" there would be restrictions on union activity that do not apply elsewhere.

I think that was at the back of peoples' minds. How hard can you push, how far do you want to get into policy issues, directly or indirectly, because the climate of the Bush Administration was basically "We'll do what we can get away with" and they did some pretty outrageous things, in terms of partisanship. Some of their senior executives were explicitly and openly partisan, far beyond where they were supposed to be.

Q: Was that a union issue at all, say, an assistant secretary trying to raise money or something on government premises?

LIMBERT: That didn't happen so much at State. If it affected an employee, an employee came to us and said, "I am being pressured to take part in a partisan event." Yes, that's very much a union issue, because it's a Hatch Act protection. But we were seeing it in other places we deal with.

For example, we had this small but very nagging issue over the ability of some of our spouses who had worked as temporary employees, PIT employees, overseas. They had lost eligibility for retirement and Congress had passed a law a few years before saying that they had the ability to buy back those years of service to establish retirement eligibility. Well, the Office of Personnel Management never issued implementing regulations, and simply refused to act. They ignored the law. When we finally got a meeting with the director of OPM, I said, "This is the law. Congress passed the law. The president signed the law." They said, "Yes, but when the president signed the law he said he didn't agree with this part of it." "But doesn't the constitution say, 'The president signs a law, it's law and whether the president disagrees with this part of it or not, it's still the law?'" But the attitude was, "We're going to do what we want."

In some ways we were doing well. Financially we were doing well. When it came to membership we were doing well. But you sensed a vague threat out there, never spelled out, but a threat to our very existence.

Q: You're saying the State Department basically has senior officers and we all know that the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was a major figure in the whole Iraq, may I use the term, fiasco. Obviously the State Department as a whole, the officer corps or something, looking at this thing, thought this was, to put it mildly, a bad idea. This was not one that had much support within the ranks. This must have percolated up to the political people in the administration. This did not make us a loved entity.

LIMBERT: No, it did not. But, on the other hand, when the calls went out for people to volunteer for Iraq, there was a very large response. Now, people saw it as a challenge, people saw it as a chance to make some money, people saw it as something interesting to do, people saw it as a chance to rescue a stalled career. Whatever the motives, a lot of people were willing to go and a lot of people did go and served very well. We lost a few people there, had a couple of people killed and injured. Nothing to the extent of what's happened to our military colleagues, but people were willing to serve. The issue, frankly, Stu, whether you agreed with the policy or not was almost beside the point. You joined the Service and you are worldwide available. You go where you are needed.

Q: Oh, sure, I served my 18 months in Vietnam during the war. It's part of the business. But I'm just thinking of an attitude. Rumsfeld had made a great point, as you already indicated, he didn't want Arabic specialists mucking around in his little empire he was building in Iraq. I was wondering whether that helped, in a way, the fact that we were not fully on board in support of the policy, did that permeate your dealings with other entities in the government?

LIMBERT: It did in one sense, I guess, that within the local of right wing establishment, the right wing press, the right wing talk shows, the right wing blogs, the right wing think tanks, there was more than the usual Foreign Service bashing using words like "disloyal". There's always an undertone of that. Basically a lot of people on the right wing just don't like us, because we deal with foreigners, we negotiate with foreigners, and sometimes we even have empathy. That's what we're trained to do. We look at the other person's point of view and that makes us suspect. We speak foreign languages. We travel a lot. We live overseas a lot. So we come in for a certain degree of bashing there. Pat Robertson suggested nuking the State Department at one point. There's some of us who probably during our career would have liked to do something similar, although maybe for different reasons. You had the Washington Times crowd and you had the AEI crowd

Q: American Enterprise Institute.

LIMBERT: And this fellow, Mowbray, who wrote about the consular service and what had happened with 9/11 and so forth. There certainly are things to criticize, but these were more than just criticisms of acts or failings. These were philosophical, ideological criticisms. Richard Perle sometimes would get on this high horse and criticize us for being disloyal. This goes back a long way. Roosevelt also talked about this, I think. So, yeah, there was this criticism.

But as head of the union and the professional association, my mantra was "let no cheap shot go unanswered." I was writing letters to the editor, I was getting on talk shows, saying, "We have a professional, patriotic and courageous group of men and women who are representing the United States in very difficult and dangerous places." It wasn't just Iraq. It wasn't just Afghanistan. We had people in the border towns in Mexico where drug wars were daily occasions. We talked about all this. We kept at it. We weren't going to let anybody get away with a cheap shot. But, of course, some of these folks are just impermeable.

Q: What was your impression of the State Department bureaucracy, its responsiveness?

LIMBERT: That's an oxymoron. It is what it is. Someone said, "What bothers you as a junior officer about the State Department bureaucracy, you either have to live with it or leave, because it's not going to change." It is what it is.

The State Department Civil Service also took a huge hit in the Nineties, when it lost its experienced mid-level people. The same thing that happened to the Foreign Service happened to the Civil Service. So the people who did the crucial support services, in terms of pay, in terms of travel and transport, and retirement, were gone and it just became chaotic.

We did our best but the State Department bureaucracy is 25,000 people, a big bureaucracy. Your problem, the fact that your pay has been screwed up, who's going to take care of it? We used to say that people have three boxes on their desks: an inbox, an outbox and a "too hard to do" box and most of these problems went into the "too hard to do" box and they would ferment there. So that was a big role for AFSA. But the State Department was what it was and also you have a low level culture war between the Foreign Service and Civil Service, which nobody seems to be able to break down.

Q: You said you went back to Iraq. What happened?

LIMBERT: I went there for two months. I still can't talk about the details of it, but basically what happened was the Department asked me to lead about a thirty person mission to a site out in the desert to deal with one particular issue out there. That was like March, April, May of 2004 we went out there. I still have some pictures from that. My wife went with me. She was part of that mission. We were at a camp about sixty miles northeast of Baghdad. It was truly a horrible place, but then it was better than the Green Zone.

I'll never forget Ambassador Dick Jones, who was at that time Bremer's deputy, came out to visit us and he looked at this desolation out there and he said, "John, I'm glad I'm not here." I said, "Dick, I'm glad I'm not there [in the Green Zone]."

Since the time I had left in 2003 it seemed like it had only gotten worse, in terms of the disfunctionality.

Q: During the time you were there, you'd been in Baghdad and all, did this carry over to the way you did your job in AFSA?

LIMBERT: Yes, because it was clear the original 90-day or 60-day plan, if you could call it that, wasn't going to work, that now the Foreign Service was very much involved and that sooner or later, if this thing was going to get fixed, you had to get people in there who knew what they were doing. You know all the stories about the 27-year-olds posting their resumes on the Heritage Foundation website and getting over there. Up until that time, there were a lot of people over there who didn't know what they were doing. It was management chaos. It wasn't clear who was responsible to whom, who was in charge.

Q: John, one of the things that has struck me is that we had the Iraq War, how we got in to it, handled and all, seemed like such a disaster and it was such an unnecessary disaster but there just doesn't seem to have been, you might say, the great protest and all. A few people resigned, about the same number resigned over our non-involvement in the Balkans. Was there a movement to really protest or is this just everybody sort of saluting, going in, doing their business?

LIMBERT: I think that was it. There were a couple of things, maybe. One issue was that from the beginning it was made very clear to the State Department, the Foreign Service, to those people with some knowledge of the area who were not true believers, who looked at this thing a bit more realistically, that our opinion didn't matter. They basically were not interested in our views. So State was shoved aside. And then when things went sour the administration came back to us and said, "Okay, now we need you. This is going to be harder than we thought and we need your abilities and we need your talents."

Well, okay, what do you do in a situation like that? You can't say, "Well, I'm sorry. It's too late now."

Q: You got us into this mess, you get us out of it!

LIMBERT: You can't do that and say, "Screw you, this is your problem!" You can't do that. You've got to serve.

I haven't seen the numbers, but I'm sure we've had several thousand Foreign Service people serve in one function or another in Iraq at least once and perhaps more. There's a great deal of pressure, subtle and otherwise, on people to go serve there and, to be fair, Stu, if you are an Arabic speaker, if your specialty is the Middle East, why not?

Q: You've got to go see the elephant.

LIMBERT: That's right. There's the concept of fair share. You do your fair share.

Q: By the way, how about some of the standard issues, sexual harassment, gender problems, ethnic problems, was this much of your business any more?

LIMBERT: It comes up from time to time. You would hear stories about missions that were being badly led, badly run. Some by career people, some by political appointees. There were instances of abuse of employees, particularly specialists, or lower level employees. To me, this is completely unacceptable and we had ways of dealing with it. Often we'd raise these, sometimes quietly, with management and management, to be fair, would take action. Bob Pearson was Director General at that time, a Foreign Service person himself and he took his responsibility in this area very seriously.

Q: So in some ways you were acting as a mail drop for problems which could be then passed on to the inspector general or others?

LIMBERT: We did not deal with the inspector general. That wasn't our way. But we did deal with Human Resources. For example, we would always send an AFSA officer to regional junior officer conferences. One of the things that Powell did which was very good was to organize conferences, not for junior officers, they don't call them that now but for entry level people, both generalists and specialists, on a bureau-wide basis.

So, for example, I flew all the way to Namibia to go to the [entry-level conference for the Africa bureau. I told people there, "I'm available, for coffee, in the hallways, anytime somebody has a problem they want to bring up, either individual or post." And I came back with a notebook full of issues. I sat down with our own people and said, "Okay, can we deal with these through our legal counsel or some other way? Which of these do we take to management?"

There were three or four we took to management, there were certain posts where there were problems going on and nobody knew about them. People may have heard things but nobody was taking action.

So, actually, we could do a lot. We have no other mandate except the people in the Service. In that sense we're like lawyers. This person who's having trouble may be difficult, may be something of a pain in the neck, but he or she still deserves good treatment. We didn't represent only the "nice" people.

And occasionally management would come back to us and say, "Why are you arguing on behalf of this person? He or she is just awful, so difficult."

Because he's a member and we're responsible as long as he is part of the Foreign Service. If we're just going to represent the "nice" people, we're not doing our job. Even the nasty ones deserve fair treatment.

We heard a lot of that from the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. Although they had a very high rate of union representation among their personnel, they would very often come back to us and say, "Why are you advocating on behalf of so and so?"

Q: How about the governing board? I remember days back in the Seventies, we had somebody, might even be mentally challenged or something, can't think of his name right now and you had real revolt. Was it a good solid board?

LIMBERT: I think so. I enjoyed working with them. Tex Harris was the secretary of the board. The board is basically the vice presidents, including the vice president for retirees, and the various constituency representatives. Our second largest constituency after the State Department is the retiree community. Maybe I'm deluding myself but the board was very helpful to me.

I worked for the board, essentially. It's not like being an ambassador somewhere. Your word is not law.

I found the board very supportive of what we were trying to do, this idea of building respect for the Service, building respect for our members, and for the locality pay issue. And the board members, in turn, they knew people and they had their own contacts. They would go out and do speaking. They would go out and do lobbying for us. I couldn't do it all on my own. So that was very helpful.

The other thing we were able to get board support for was redoing our shabby headquarters building. We had this beautiful piece of real estate down at 21st and E Street but the conditions for the people who worked there were just appalling. We had this excellent professional staff but their working conditions were terrible. We were able to get first the Finance Committee and then the board to support a major renovation project, which was very expensive. A lot of money to get that done. As I said, the board was very supportive.

We tried to do most things by consensus and a lot of my time was spent in working to get that consensus before we ever got to the board, because the board meetings were 20, 25 people. That's not a place where anything is going to get decided. You need to have things ready to present to the board. Now if somebody on the board has a serious objection to something, that's fair enough. But you hope that's been worked out beforehand.

I can't remember any knockdown, drag outs on the board. There were differences of personality and style, as you might expect. But I don't remember having to bang my gavel very often to say, "All right, children, behave nicely!"

It was a very professional operation. For me it was a pleasure to work with that group of people. I learned a lot from them.

Q: Well, then, 2005, what happened?

LIMBERT: Well, I ended my service at AFSA and I got a very nice assignment as the dean of the school of the language studies at the Foreign Service Institute.

Q: So you did that from when to when?

LIMBERT: I did that from September of 2005 until April of 2006, when I retired.

I must add that my AFSA service was occasionally interrupted. Once, I mentioned, I went to Iraq. The next time, in the summer of 2005, I was asked to go to Sudan as temporary chargï¿½.

Q: John, could you explain what you were doing and what was the situation in the Sudan?

LIMBERT: What had happened was that our last resident ambassador had left about 1998. It was Ambassador Tim Carney. Back in 1998 I was scheduled to replace Ambassador Carney. That nomination got derailed, however, not in Washington but in Khartoum. It can take a year or more for all these processes to work through.

I'd gone through all of the preliminary steps and the proposal had gone to the host government, which was a normal thing. Before the president announces an ambassadorial appointment, we go to the host country, saying, "We're proposing nominating John Limbert as ambassador to your country, to Sudan. Please give us your agreement to that." But they use the French word, agrï¿½ment, as a formal diplomatic term. They say, "Please give us your agreement to that," because the president obviously doesn't want to be embarrassed by nominating someone that the other country will not accept.

98 times out of a hundred this is a formality. It's a matter of time, sometimes, but the host country will then come back and say, "Yes, we have no problem with this person." Same thing when another country wants to send an ambassador here.

So my name went to the Sudanese. Relations weren't good. There were problems, but no one foresaw anything bad happening. But this was the summer of 1998 and then our embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were attacked and shortly afterwards

Q: This was al Qaeda bombing, with significant losses.

LIMBERT: With significant loss of life, particularly among Kenyans, very heavy loss of life. Sudan got caught up in this because we suspected that there was some kind of nerve gas producing facility in Khartoum. You've probably heard of the missile attacks on al Qaeda training bases in Afghanistan. At a similar time we hit a facility in Khartoum.

Well, that attack essentially destroyed any chance that I was going to get out. But the Sudanese never said no. They never said yes. They simply did not respond to the request for agrï¿½ment. So I was in limbo for about a year and became what the Department calls a "hall walker." Not literally, because you take a temporary job in the Department. I had done refresher Arabic, I had learned about Sudan. I was very much looking forward to going.

It's a difficult relationship. It's a difficult country. But it's a challenge and that's what we do.

After that happened, eventually the U.S. government got tired of waiting for a response and pulled my nomination. I eventually went elsewhere, to Mauritania. I always regretted that I never had gone to Sudan.

After that, we have never nominated another ambassador. We had a chargï¿½ des affaires there, people who were in charge of the embassy but not with the title of ambassador. The Sudanese downgraded their representation here in Washington to the same degree. We filled in, we used temporary people. Within the bureaucracy there was always discussion, what do we do: nominate an ambassador, do something else? So there was a series of temporary people.

It was rather ironic. One morning there was an op-ed piece in the Post by one of our senior Africa specialists in the Department who had retired, who had been asked to go to Sudan. He was working outside of Washington, I think as a journalist, and was asked to go to Sudan by the Department. He had agreed and then found the Department had decided not to send him, had scotched his assignment.

At the time I thought, "That's quite an interesting story. " I didn't think it would affect me but shortly afterward I did a call saying, "Would you go out there as temporary chargï¿½?"

Again, as I've mentioned, when the State Department says to you, "Would you like to do something?" it's not really a question. But we're a polite organization.

Q: It's one of the things that I think, often junior officers, when they come in to the Foreign Service and all and I've done this as a boss, say, "It'd be nice if you wrote something on" this or that, you use vague terms. In the military, you say, "You go and do that!" We're saying the same damned thing but often somebody who's new to the Service doesn't catch this signal.

LIMBERT: It's part of our culture and it can be difficult for people. It was difficult for me at the beginning to understand, "He expects me to do this."

Again, it was time limited. They said, "Go for about three months." As I said, I had wanted to go to Sudan and Sudan was always a fascinating place, even difficult. I agreed.

So off I went, and talked to different people back here in Washington. Sudan has always been difficult, even before Darfur. Everyone knows of Darfur. Darfur is a huge issue. You can't drive by a church or a synagogue here in town without seeing some sign saying, "Save Dafur!," "Help Darfur!" It's a huge issue. It created a coalition in the U.S. across racial lines, across religious lines, across left and right.

But even before Darfur, Sudan had very touchy domestic implications. There were issues about slavery. The north-south conflict in Sudan had emphasized religious communities. You had a Moslem, Arab north fighting a civil war against at least elements of a non-Moslem, non-Arabic speaking south.

What I had found back in 1998, was that when you mentioned Sudan in the Department of State and in the U.S. government, reactions were emotional. There was a lot of emotion and a lot of very strong feeling about the country. People's teeth clenched, and they would get very excited. That was still true in 2005. There was a lot of emotion.

The difference was, interestingly enough, that by 2005 the Deputy Secretary of State in those days, Robert Zoellick, had essentially taken on the Sudan portfolio. Mr. Zoellick, a very capable diplomat, a very capable negotiator, and a very well organized person brought a coherence to the policy which had not existed before. In 1998, Sudan, within the U.S. government, was a battleground and a stalemated battleground. Different factions shot at each other in bureaucratic battle from a series of entrenched positions. Having somebody with Zoellick's stature, rank and ability in charge at least had ended that kind of hostilities. There was confusion, there was disagreement, some of it quite profound, but at least there was no question within the government as to who was in charge.

I got to Khartoum on the 3rd of July. People had said to me, "You will like the Sudanese. Southerners, northerners, Darfurians, you will like them all. They are attractive, intelligent, engaging, hospitable people. Remember, the government in Khartoum is not our friend. You will develop very good personal rapport with people, but the government is not our friend." And those were good principles.

I got there just in time for our Fourth of July reception. I spent about three months there, until the end of September. It was probably the hardest thing I ever had to do in the Foreign Service and I've had some pretty hard assignments in pretty hard places. But this was as difficult and complicated as anything I had done.

Just to give you a taste of what it worked like, in the three months I was there we had two visits from Deputy Secretary Zoellick, we had one visit from Secretary Rice, and we had the death of John Garang

Q: Explain who he was.

LIMBERT: John Garang had been the leader of a Sudanese party called the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement and then the associated armed wing, the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army. He had led the forces based mostly in the south which had fought a twenty year, very bloody, destructive civil war against the central government in Khartoum. Important thing to remember about Garang was that although he was a southerner by background, he was not secessionist. He was not fighting for an independent southern Sudanese. His vision and his ambitions were to rejoin the central government and in fact people said that had he lived he would have probably run for president as a strong presidential candidate for all of Sudan. He was a charismatic figure.

I was there for his return to Khartoum, somewhere around the 6th or 7th of July. The estimate was somewhere between half a million and a million people, not just southerners, but both southerners and northerners, turned out to the airport for his triumphant arrival back in Khartoum.

I got there on July 3rd. We had a senator visiting at the time, a Democratic senator. I went to a number of meetings with him. It was odd, because all he wanted to talk about was how bad the Bush tax cuts were and, frankly, the Sudanese really didn't give a hoot about that. Whatever the Sudanese wanted to talk about, he kept bringing the discussion around to how bad the Bush tax cuts were.

So he left and then, on the 9th of July, was the formal process that ended this long civil war. What they did was swear in John Garang as the First Vice President of the country. The arrangement was that the SPLM would become a political party working in all of Sudan and would actively compete as a political party. So John Garang was there, the president, al-Bashir, was there. They swore in a Second Vice President, who was also a northerner. So they had a president, a northerner, a First Vice President, a southerner, and a Second Vice President, a northerner.

Well, this was a big deal. Again, Zoellick came as the representative of the United States. That was the first time I had worked with him. Kofi Annan was there. Amr Moussa, the head of the Arab League, was there. There were chiefs of state from neighboring countries. It was a huge ceremony, a big deal and rightly so. This was the end of a twenty year civil war. The agreement was called the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the CPA and it led to the formation of something known as the GNU, the Government of National Unity. This was the first step and the agreement that had done this, I'm sorry to get into all these weeds, was the Naivasha Agreement. Naivasha has recently been in the news, I think, the site of strike violence in Kenya, a place in Kenya where these agreements were negotiated.

And they laid out in great detail. It wasn't just saying, "We'll all be nice to each other now." No, it laid out in great detail what was supposed to happen, who would occupy which governmental office, what the SPLM would do, what would happen with Sudan's oil, what would happen with the south and so forth. So it laid all these things out in great specificity. This was the first step, to have this inauguration and as I said it was a huge deal.

I had not worked with Deputy Secretary Zoellick before, but I have great admiration for him. The way he worked with the Sudanese was extremely effective, because the Sudanese government, in particular, comes in for some very heavy treatment here in Washington. They're on the list of state sponsors of terrorism. They're subject to about every sanction known to man. They've been put in every penalty box that you could possibly imagine, some of this Darfur related, some of it going back to what had happened in the south, and some of it related to terrorism.

But the Sudanese are used to, how can I put this, getting berated, sermonized, hectored, by American political figures, who tell them, "You must do this! You are bad people! You do all these bad things! You need to change!," so forth and so on. With Zoellick you saw none of that. He was non-judgmental and as a result the Sudanese liked working with him. They knew they could speak seriously with him, he would deal seriously with them and as a result his presence and the rapport he established, particularly with Vice President Taha, who became Second Vice President, became extremely important in getting this peace agreement negotiated.

The other principle that came out of these visits and almost any Foreign Service Officer will tell you this, that when you have a high level visit there is always an entourage. There are other people from the State Department, people from other government agencies who are very senior people in their own right. But, essentially, when they come, your only concern is with that principal and that's the person you worry about. And frankly the other people have to take care of themselves. They may come back on their own later on and then you take care of them. But when you're in an entourage that's exactly what you are, you're a strap hanger. If the motorcade leaves at 8:32 you better be there at 8:32, because nobody's going to come and get you. Again, another part of our culture, I guess, but there it was.

That applied with a vengeance in Sudan. We had frequent high level visitors.

Okay, the agreement was signed, Deputy Secretary Zoellick left and around the end of July we get the news that John Garang's helicopter, on its way from Kampala to the SPLM headquarters in southern Sudan. That headquarters, by the way, was not Juba, the major city of southern Sudan, which still had not been evacuated by Sudanese troops, as it was supposed to be under the peace agreement. But Garang's helicopter, on its way to somewhere in southern Sudan, had disappeared. Our first reaction was, "O, heck." An hour or two later we got the news that his helicopter had made a forced landing somewhere in northern Uganda and everybody was okay. Then we thought we'd dodged that bullet. At about six or seven in the evening my phone started ringing and it kept ringing and it kept ringing. It turned out that that second report was false, that in fact the Ugandans had not found the plane and he was still missing. So you had to assume the worse.

Well, once again, one of the things that most of us learn in the Foreign Service is, in a situation like this safety is everything. You are responsible for the safety of your community. That's in the letter of instruction that a chief of mission gets from the president. And I think every Foreign Service Office that I know takes that mandate very seriously. So, basically, what we did was to say, "Look, let's assume the worst, let's assume that he's dead and we will be facing serious civil strife tomorrow. Go home, stay by your radio, stay by your telephone, don't go out if you don't absolutely have to and stay where we can reach you. If you hear any confirmed news, spread it around." You go through the normal things. Overnight we left one person at the embassy, we set up a log of events, we kept in touch with Washington and neighboring posts. We were talking to Kampala and to anybody within the Sudanese government we knew.

But the news was not confirmed until the middle of the night, when the reports started coming through that the wreckage had been found. It was never clear to me whether this wreckage was actually in Sudan or in northern Uganda. It's a mountainous area. It was out on the BBC the next morning but things hadn't started to happen in the city yet and all the reports were that the roads were clear. So people came to work. The other thing to remember is that Khartoum was what we call an unaccompanied post. We didn't have family members there, or if family members were there it would be just a who was also a Foreign Service or a government employee. Most people were there without family and it was considered a dangerous place.

I remember we went in to the embassy that morning and, again, in a situation like this you're very dependent on your security officer, a Foreign Service specialist. His job is to keep the embassy building and people safe. About ten o'clock that morning I had an appointment at the foreign ministry, an appointment I had asked for ten days before, to talk about a visit. It was a routine thing but something I needed to do. So I went over to the foreign ministry about ten. I was sitting with the director of North American affairs, a person I dealt with a lot and I'm in my suit, he's in a suit, we're having this very civilized diplomatic conversation. All of a sudden there starts to be shooting outside the window. We kind of look at each other and say, "What do you think that is?" It was a contest of who could keep the stiffest upper lip as the city was burning. You could see smoke from shops that were being burned and buildings that were being attacked. As we ended this conversation we could see people in the ministry were very worried, as they had every right to be. I said, "I better get back to my embassy."

What had happened was in reaction to Garang's death was that mobs of southern Sudanese started burning and looting. There were about somewhere between a million and a half and two million southern Sudanese living in Khartoum, mostly displaced by war or famine and many had been there for twenty years. By now they spoke Arabic, they were pretty much integrated. But they were definitely southerners, and many of them lived in particular areas. Groups of southerners started attacking northerners. They went after shops. How these targets were identified and how a mob works, who knows? Randomly. As the day wore on these attacks escalated and then northerners started attacking southerners and you had this kind of tit for tat violence.

Then the government announced a curfew, so we all had to get out and be back in our homes by about 5:30, 6:00 at night. Once again, it was a matter of go home and stay put. The good thing was that nobody was attacking foreigners. This was an internal Sudanese battle.

The night before, the person who had been the deputy chief of mission there and who had been chargï¿½ himself for about six months before I came was about to leave. He was a very good officer, very knowledgeable, but he had been there a year and was tired. It had been a difficult year for him, he wanted to leave and he was scheduled out on an airplane leaving about midnight that night.

So that night I kept getting reports, basically over my cell phone, of fighting, intercommunal fighting, particularly violence against southerners. These kinds of reports and rumors are very dangerous. Somebody would call somebody and a southerner would call a family friend in the United States or a relative and they would call somebody who knew somebody in the Department of State or who knew somebody in Congress and then it would get to the Department of State. As a result, two o'clock in the morning, it came back to me.

Q: You're talking about a new era, where people in the Sudan have their cell phones.

LIMBERT: Exactly, cell phones were the way of communicating. I'm sure they're beyond that now, it's up to texting and everything else. This information was flying back and forth and there was no way of controlling it. I began to get telephone calls from frantic people saying, "Can't you do something about this?" This is two o'clock in the morning, we're under curfew and I didn't make the obvious reply, which was, "What do you suggest?" We did manage, talking to my British counterpart and talking to people in Washington, we managed to get hold of the governor of Khartoum province, called the wali.

Walis are very powerful people. These are representatives of the ministry of interior. So under them come all of the paramilitaries and the police. Those are the first line of defense in restoring order.

The first reaction of these officials is to say, "Oh, nothing's happening, it's all exaggerated." I said, "Look, whatever it is, it's very dangerous. Even the rumors of violence can kill. Because somebody hears that a northern groups is attacking a southern group, it may not be true but they're first reaction is, 'We've gotta do something about that.' They'll go out and attack and then these things become self-fulfilling. They feed on each other."

So I made the case, and my British colleague made the case and one of our senior officers back here made the case that, "Look, this is a dangerous situation. You need to make sure that it doesn't blow out of control. Restore order!" It was sort of a nice way of saying, "Look, get somebody out there, get the police in gear, get organized." And to their credit, they did. And they also got the message to the preachers, the imams of the mosques, to damp down anti-southern, anti-Christian kind of rhetoric, which was another element within the civil strife. That's maybe the good thing about a dictatorship. You can do things like that.

So the word got out and the word got out to the police. They never really did have to bring the army in directly. They didn't want to do that. They didn't want to bring the army in. That night was probably the worst. By the next day things seemed to be quieting down a little bit.

And in the midst of all this, the replacement for the deputy chief of mission showed up. He met his predecessor at the airport, they crossed paths for about 45 minutes and then the departing DCM ran for the plane and said, "I'm out of here!" I do not blame him at all.

The replacement came in, he was learning where the bathrooms are, learning where the cafeteria is. He and I were sitting somewhere having a cup of coffee and all of a sudden the security officer runs in and says, "Lock down! Lock down!" There's shooting around the corner and there was a rumor that one of the southern militia leaders, Paulino Matip, who had been sometimes allied with the government, sometimes allied with Garang, had been shot and his supporters were shooting up the town. And this poor replacement, who'd been three hours on the job, he's asking himself, "What have I gotten into?"

So it was an eventful three months. As I said, we had Secretary Rice's visit.

Q: How did she relate? What was she after?

LIMBERT: A couple of things. She went to Darfur, made about a four or five hour visit to Darfur, to one of the camps, again, to show concern, genuine concern. It was one of the most emotional moments I've seen in my career, when she was sitting and talking to some of the Darfurian women in the camps about their experience. Very difficult session for all of us, particularly for her.

With the Sudanese government, it was, again, a lot about Darfur, the need to take positive actions, the need to get the militias there under control, to support the Government of National Unity, the north-south reconciliation. She visited the president, the foreign minister and Vice President John Garang, to show that, yes, we will support this unification process. John Garang had many friends in the United States, within the administration within Congress and it was to show this friendship continuing.

I can relate one incident which got into the papers. We went to see the president. Again, my job was to stick like glue to that principal, to the Secretary. You can't worry about the rest of the entourage. Well, we drove into the president's palace, there was a mix-up with security and the guards weren't going to let the rest of the people in and her interpreter was in the back and he finally was able to fight his way through into the meeting. I had this nightmare that I would have to interpret and my Arabic is nowhere near that quality and that relations between the U.S. and Sudan, which were never very good, would get even worse and we would end up going to war because the interpreter screwed it up.

Anyway, he did arrive but there was a big holding area for the press outside the meeting room and inside the meeting room with the president were of course then his team and Secretary Rice, the interpreter, myself and two or three of her close advisors. The rest of the entourage and the press, of which there was a large contingent, were outside in a sort of a holding area.

For all I knew and for all I cared, it could be World War III out there. It didn't matter. All that you care about is what's going on inside that room. It could be a boxing match, a wrestling match, be anything going on out there. Don't worry about it.

So the meeting ends and the door opens. Some of the press photographers try to go into the meeting room to take some pictures and the Sudanese security pounce on them and start pushing them around. And one of the people they pushed, or allegedly pushed, was none other than Andrea Mitchell. She's Alan Greenspan's wife, but she's also this correspondent, for NBC I think. Well, she didn't take well to this and neither did the Secretary.

Then my job then became calming down a very distraught Andrea Mitchell on the airplane, because we went from there to the airplane to fly to Darfur and the Secretary demanded an apology from the Sudanese for this kind of behavior. I had to call my deputy, said, "Look, call the foreign ministry, tell the foreign minister this whole thing is falling apart." And to his credit, by the time we landed in El Fasher, the apology was there.

In terms of timing, I'm a little bit out of sequence here, because her visit came while Garang was still alive, so that would have been around the 22nd or the 23rd of July.

Q: What was your reading on the Darfur business at that time?

LIMBERT: There were no good guys. That assignment was of the most interesting things I ever did in my career, this is why, as I said, this is such an addictive career and an appealing career, because you do things that when you think about them you say, "I don't believe I actually did that!" One of the things I did, with Zoellick's team was we flew to El Fasher and then we took a helicopter that belonged to the African Union observer mission and we flew into a mountain area known as the Jebel Marra, the west of Sudan, which was controlled by one faction of the Darfurian insurgents. So we land on this field, and the area is spectacularly beautiful. You think of Darfur as a wasteland, but this particular area, is high, and green. So we land on this field and we end up in a school talking to these insurgent groups and they talk about what they want and their demands and so forth.

But at the end of the day you came away with the result that there weren't a lot of good guys in this. The insurgents have legitimate grievances, in terms of the central government's neglect of the region, but that's the way central governments in Khartoum have always operated. Basically they take care of the center and the periphery pretty much fends for itself.

Q: A huge country.

LIMBERT: It's enormous and if the periphery gets too assertive or difficult to rule, as happens, then things get very nasty. In 2003, when this uprising started, the insurgents actually captured El Fasher, the administrative capital of the region and overran police posts, killed soldiers, killed policemen and this area risked slipping out of government control. Well, the Sudanese government did not have the wherewithal to establish direct control, one reason being that much of its military personnel are Darfurians. They recruit a lot of their military from this region. Tough people come out of there, where there's not a lot of economic opportunity, so they were drawn to the Sudanese military.

As just a little sidebar, just to talk about the complications of this thing, it was these same Darfurians who were responsible for a lot of the atrocities against the southerners during that civil war. As a result of that, there wasn't a lot of love lost between the southern Sudanese and the Darfurians, even though both were rebelling against Khartoum's authority.

As a result of that, the central government did not trust its military to act in Darfur to restore authority, so it did what it has done traditionally, which is to rely on local militias which it arms and supports. I had mentioned Paulino Matip in the south, he was one of those militia leaders. The south in the Eighties and Nineties became something out of the Thirty Years War, where you had these competing militias, basically glorified bandits, paid for allegiance to one side, shifting allegiance to the other side and of course it was the ordinary people who got caught in the middle of all this destruction.

Same thing happened in Darfur. The central government armed, equipped, and paid local militias to go after the insurgents and of course this was a time, then, that these militias would not make a distinction between the armed guerillas of some insurgent group and the local inhabitants.

In Sudan, to make a little parenthetical comment, in Sudan and in most countries where I've served social peace is very fragile and breaks down very quickly under the right circumstances. You go into many of these places and everything looks fine. People are out on the street and they're buying and selling and the bazaars are working and everybody's laughing and joking with everybody else and you think, "People seem to be in harmony." And that's true but it seems to take very little to set things off, as we've seen in Kenya recently, as we saw in Rwanda, an extreme case in Rwanda and I've seen it elsewhere.

The same thing happened in Sudan. There were old scores to settle, and opportunities. People talk about range wars, that these were herdsmen versus settled farmers, that there was an racial, ethnic issue of Arab speakers versus non-Arab speakers. All of these factors worked into it.

But the basic factor was who controls, the center against the periphery. The periphery was asserting itself, was demanding things, like the south had demanded things and had attained a lot of them. "Okay, if the southerners can do this, why can't we?"

So, getting back to your original question about what you saw, I said that Sudan was extremely complicated. You had all of these issues of Darfur and all the complications. You have the splintering of the opposition in Darfur. Maybe it started as one group, two groups, three groups. There's a famous scene in The Life of Brian, the old Monty Python movie, of something similar, where they're talking about the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Judea" and the "Judean Peoples Liberation Front" and all this, eventually they lose track of whom they're really fighting against and they're fighting against each other.

That happened in Darfur. So when an American representative such as Secretary Rice would press the Sudanese to act differently in Darfur, to settle with the Darfurians, the response of the Sudanese government was, "Fine. We're ready. Tell us who we can talk to. There are twenty groups out there and they don't agree among themselves. We're ready to talk. Give is an interlocutor. Give us somebody to talk to."

Now, unfortunately, the Darfurians, by their own disunity, let the central government do that. The Darfurians ceded the moral high ground to Khartoum. Now I suspect that Khartoum may have had a hand in that disunity. What's the phrase, divide and rule, an old tradition in that part of the world and so the authorities in Khartoum may have had a hand in that disunity, because it certainly served their purpose. But as long as the Darfurians were disunited and squabbling among themselves, it was very easy for the Sudanese government to take the position that it did and very difficult for us to press.

Q: I would think, the way, Darfur, it goes through the simplification process of the media and all that. As Darfur has been portrayed on TV and reporting and all this, the central government is picking on these poor Darfurians and letting loose these Janjaweed people. In other words, the good guys are the Darfurians and the Sudanese central government and their allies are the bad ones. For you, as a Foreign Service Officer, to try to portray the complexity of this, I would think that your knowledge would fall on very unfertile ground when you're talking to Americans.

LIMBERT: That depended on who you were talking to. I mentioned, certainly Deputy Secretary Zoellick did not share this good guy-bad guy view of this problem. He had dealt with the Darfurians. He was as frustrated by them as anyone and he had subsequent dealings with the Darfurians which were even worse.

You make a good observation, Stu, that as Foreign Service Officers we don't deal very well with good guy-bad guy divisions. Somebody said that diplomats seem to do better at dawn and twilight. We don't do well in clear day or dark night. It's those shades of gray where we operate best and that situation was murky twilight, to say the least.

That was just one piece of the Sudanese puzzle. I compare Sudan to a very complicated layout of model trains, where you have interlocking tracks and intersecting tracks and switches, trains going here, trains going there and they're all moving at their own pace but they're all related and it's all you can do to keep them from crashing into each other.

So you had a north-south division, you had the peace agreement and the Government of National Unity, very fragile, you had the democratization program going on, going from a one party state to a multiparty state. You had humanitarian problems all over the country. You had reconstruction. How do you reconstruct this place?

What about people? What are you going to do about all these displaced people? Where are they going to go? Are they going to stay where they are or are they going to go back where they came from?

You had the ultimate fate of the south, because the Naivasha agreement, the peace agreement, gives it the right to secede, specifies a plebiscite by 2011 in which southerners will have the choice of staying within a united Sudan or seceding into their own country.

You have all our bilateral issues with Sudan. One of the big ones is counterterrorism. Although we and the Sudanese may not be friends, the Sudanese have been very helpful in issues of counterterrorism.

Q: Al Qaeda has no particular there any more, would you say?

LIMBERT: Depends on who you ask. We didn't find any. We didn't think so. Our best intelligence judgment is they don't, but there is around this town and the country a cadre of professional Khartoum-bashers, for whom nothing good can ever come out of Khartoum. So cooperation on counterterrorism is written off.

At one point a story got out in the papers, back in 2003, before I went out there, that the CIA had invited the head of Sudanese intelligence to come to the States for a visit and briefing. He came over, and they'd given him briefings. And after this happened, after the story was revealed, a congressman got up and said, "If he was here, he should have been arrested for human rights violations." I went to see that congressman and I said, "Sir, if you want to arrest him, that's fine, but as the head of mission out there give me 48 hours notice so I can get all of our people out of there, because this fragile reed of protection of diplomats, diplomatic immunity, would be gone and we would be fair game for anybody." And to his credit, he got the point.

But that was the kind of thing that happened. With Sudan you were working all of these complex issues and at the same time there is this domestic free for all back here on Sudan. All of these interest groups, political, religious, ideological, whatever, which are also players and have to be considered.

Q: The British, it used to be Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, were they players, or members of the EU, were we all singing out of the same hymn book as far as trying to get the Sudanese to do things?

LIMBERT: The main Western players were the British, us, the Dutch and the Norwegians. The Norwegians had a very big aid program down there. The French and the Germans, not so much. The Germans had ticked off the Sudanese so badly over something they had done, something one of their ministers had done a few years before, that nobody would even see the German ambassador. Their country was in bad odor.

The French traditionally just didn't have a role there. They had a role in Chad, while their role in Rwanda was not so glorious.

So those were the players, but everybody and his brother had a special representative for Darfur. The Italians did, the EU did. The UN stayed very active there. So these were all the players. But basically it was us, the British, the Dutch and the Norwegians.

Q: How cooperative were the Sudanese, say on terrorism matters?

LIMBERT: To the best of my knowledge our government was very happy with what they were doing. I don't know the details. Again, within that short time I was there, it was not something I needed to get into but all I know is that the feeling was this is worth doing and this is worth preserving. As I say, it becomes a paradoxical relationship, because we are bashing them on the other side and yet we're working closely with them on another.

Q: Did you get down to the south at all?

LIMBERT: Only once. It was for the funeral of John Garang, another delegation that I had to deal with. This time the head of it was Andrew Natsios. It was a presidential delegation, which means it has a certain protocol involved in it and once again you deal with the principal, you take care of Mr. Natsios, who at that time was also the director of the Agency for International Development. He was very interested in Sudan. Like a lot of people in this administration, he'd had a history of working in Sudan, on the non-governmental organization side of the house. There was an accompanying delegation.

They all took care of themselves, with the exception of a congressman who showed up with his aide and after the funeral declared that he wanted to sort of hang out in southern Sudan on his own for a couple of days, at which point both the security officer from Khartoum and the security officer from Nairobi, who had come to Juba for the event, both turned green, saying, "We don't think this is a good idea" but what can we say since the congressman doesn't work for the executive branch. This is another piece of Foreign Service reality. Everyone from the executive branch works for the chief of mission or is under the authority of the chief of mission in a specific country. Members of the legislative branch are not. So if he wanted to stay, he could stay. So we coaxed and coaxed and coaxed and said, "Sir, this is not a good idea." He put his foot down. Finally what persuaded him was when somebody said, "You know, sir, there's a plane out today, and we're all leaving on it. One group is going to Nairobi this afternoon, and some of us are going back to Khartoum this afternoon. We don't know when the next plane out will be." And that got his attention. All of a sudden, we understood that he had changed his mind and decided to depart with the group going to Nairobi. He didn't want to go anywhere near Khartoum.

Talking about the south, there was a faction within the U.S. government that had dealt with the south, or the southerners and the SPLM and Garang and his people for so long, independent of the central government, because they were an insurgent movement, that they got into the habit of thinking of the south, even after the settlement, as an independent country. And occasionally we would get these very nicely phrased notes or telephone calls from the Sudanese government saying, "We understand that such and such American official is in the south. Did he have a visa? Where did he get his visa?"

And we had to gently remind some of our own colleagues that they were now entering the sovereign territory of the state of Sudan. To do so, that required a visa. Believe me, this was not a message that our colleagues wanted to hear. They were still operating by the old pattern.

Q: Well, when you came out of that, after three months there, did you find that you were swept into one of the conflicting groups, or could you just sort of shut this whole thing?

LIMBERT: Again, I was in the "no good guys" group, the twilight people. It was actually rather funny, because as my time grew short I kept getting calls from people back here, good friends and colleagues, saying, "Won't you stay a little longer?" I asked, "How much longer?" They said, "Well, we're not sure." I said, "Okay." So I went back and forth and finally I said, "Look, we are expecting our first grandchild in early October. Whatever else happens, I'm going to be back for that. Also I have another job to go to, and have already delayed going to that and people are expecting me." But that's another reality of the Foreign Service. If you're in a difficult place and if you're doing a halfway decent job, it's much easier for them just to keep you there indefinitely than to try to go out and find somebody else, another sucker.

Q: Then let's talk about the language school. Just talk a bit about the set-up of the language school and then some of the dynamics that you found there.

LIMBERT: I went there in September 2005. I had had a previous assignment at the Foreign Service Institute, director of orientation in 1992-94. My wife had worked at the language school when I was here in Washington earlier. I had been a student at the language school. I'd studied French at the language school. I knew a lot of the people here already.

It's a big operation. We teach seventy languages. I don't think there are very many places that teach that many different languages. We teach them primarily to employees and dependents of the foreign affairs agencies, but also to employees from other agencies of the U.S. government.

And we teach them not as a university would teach them, where you go for four days a week. You're in class five to six hours a day with three or four people around a table and an instructor, plus you're expected to do a lot of work outside of class.

It is a very intense experience and I call our teachers the magicians or miracle workers. We can take an employee, and when he walks in the door he speaks not a word of French, and six months later he walks out that door and he's speaking French. Or Romanian or Pashto or whatever it is. There are going to be exceptions. You occasionally run into a person that simply didn't learn anything, but that's very rare.

And the other part is that from that person we demand a lot. It's expensive, it's intense. It's a lot of work. The small class, the trained teacher, the full time aspect of it. For the student there's no other job but to learn.

Very few foreign services in the world do this. When you join a lot of the European diplomatic services, you're expected to know two or three foreign languages already and if you need to learn an exotic language like Urdu, you might pick it up at night classes, if you don't have it already. Very few places do what we do.

But, conversely, we expect a lot out of our people. If you've been studying Chinese or Hindi and you're in New Delhi as consular officer and you get a call in the middle of the night that some American has been injured in a car wreck and is in the hospital and the police are interested, 'cause they found some kind of suspicious substance in his car, you must do it, you've must go there. And people are going to be yelling and screaming at each other in some incomprehensible dialect under less than ideal circumstances and have to use that language to sort it out. If you're in Africa and you're talking about HIV/AIDS with a group of professionals and they do it in French, then you have to do it in French. So we expect a lot out of our people.

What I found was, we're very successful with some languages. The Spanish, the French departments had been doing this for years. They're good. In 24 weeks, the students are out and speaking. Chinese, very impressive, what they do. Russian, very impressive. That's a no-nonsense group of teachers. You get in there and they just work you to death.

Others, some of the exotics, Uzbek, Turkmen, Azerbaijani, for example, we are less successful. You have issues. If you send somebody to Georgia, to Tblisi, do you teach them Russian or do you teach them Georgian? Georgians speak Georgian. On the other hand, it is a very exotic language, not related to anything else as far as we know. Not Indo-European, not Turkic. You could spend a year learning it and then that's it.

Wonderful staff, the teachers just give their all for these students.

Q: Did you find yourself with the problems that the Voice of America has, where the various broadcasters and writers and all bring all the baggage of ethnic prejudices, the whole thing, or not?

LIMBERT: I can't say it didn't happen. We had I think about 400 instructors from different backgrounds. I think there had been some problems earlier on, in the Nineties, particularly after the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the breakup of other countries. Is it Czech or is it Slovak? We used to teach Serbo-Croatian. We used to teach Czechoslovakian. Now we teach Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, and Macedonian. We teach Czech and Slovak separately.

Q: In the Sixties, I took Serbo-Croatian and I ended up at one point in Bosnia monitoring an election and they said, "Oh, you're speaking Bosnian." I didn't realize I'd learned a different language.

LIMBERT: That's right. I remember one new officer came into the Service, and he was a native Czech speaker. He had worked for the Czech service of Voice of America. He was of Czech ancestry. So he goes and he takes his Czech examination and he earns a 5/5, which is native fluency. So he says, "I can take a Slovak exam, too. They're very close. Why don't I take the Slovak exam?" So he takes the Slovak exam, he understands everything they say, they understand everything he says and he can read perfectly. So he gets a 0/5. Zero speaking, five reading. So this makes no sense at all. Isn't language about communication?

And the response from our experts was interesting. It was, "Well, yes, he understood we said. We understood everything he said. But he wasn't speaking Slovak."

You did have some of these things going on, but human beings are human beings and basically what I did was go around and met with groups of teachers and basically said, "Look, you're professionals and we expect you to act as professionals." People know exactly what that means. Most of these people had been here for a while, they knew what their job was and they knew what was expected of professionals. If you didn't agree with U.S. policy or did agree with U.S. policy on this or that issue, that was not your job. Your views were your views, but you were not there to indoctrinate.

Once in a while I had to intervene, or one of the other supervisors, usually at a lower level, could intervene and that would solve the problem. There was less of that than you might think.

Q: One of the issues that comes up in language training is that a certain point you reach kind of a plateau and then it would seem to really make sense to put the person in the country, put 'em with a family or something like that.

LIMBERT: We used to do that. We used to do a lot of things. You'd send somebody over, we used give people six months of Persian and then send them to Iran to live with a family. When George Kennan was in the Foreign Service, he spent his first couple of years at a university in Germany to perfect his German. We don't do much of that anymore. It's a matter of time and budgeting and administration.

We send, for example, some of our Hebrew students to Israel to what are called Ulpans. Those are organization the Israeli government operates to integrate new immigrants. People come into Israel speaking many different languages, from many backgrounds. This is to teach them enough Hebrew so they can live there. Once we also realized that some of these Ulpans were ideologically suspect, that they were associated with one party or another. Despite that, for the most part this program worked very well.

We also had a similar program in Russia. We were looking at doing it with Vietnamese, with Arabic.

But the plateau affect was less serious than the decline that often happened when people got out to post and they had difficulty using this hard-learned language in the setting. One of our Greek teachers coined a word to describe this, which translates as "fear of making mistakes." If your language is less than perfect, therefore you don't use it and it deteriorates. This is definitely a reality.

I've seen this among colleagues. In the case of Arabic, there's a terrible problem with this, because the language that you learn in the classroom is a kind of standardized Arabic, kind of a television, radio Arabic, that nobody speaks among themselves. So if you go to somebody's home, they're talking Egyptian dialect or Tunisian dialect or Yemeni dialect and it's very different from what you learned. So your ability to communicate and use what you know, is very limited. So occasionally you've got to sort of make yourself into a grade one extrovert to do this. Someone that's a little more introverted or a little bit shy about this, he can lose the language.

Q: Language, the teaching of foreign languages, is a big industry. Lot of universities, colleges, commercial firms, are doing this. Other organizations, did they look to us or were we looking to others? How did this work?

LIMBERT: Even what the Defense Language Institute does is different. First of all, there's a different student population. Much of their student body is enlisted people. Our students tend to be older, generally better educated but age sometimes is not a positive factor in learning languages. Better education is, usually.

Universities do have intensive summer programs, some of which approximate what we do. I think Middlebury College's program is an excellent one. But their regular programs are very different from what we do. How can you compare a four hour a week program, for a student who's taking mechanical engineering and political science at the same time he's studying Chinese? That just doesn't parallel to what we do.

Q: So you did this, what, for about a year?

LIMBERT: No, less. I came in September and I left in April.

Q: And then what?

LIMBERT: Retired.

Q: As with everybody else, when you retire, you don't really retire. You went to the Naval Academy, did you?

LIMBERT: That's right. I had been there between 1981 and 1984 as a Foreign Service assignment. We have billets, or we had billets, I don't know if we still do, at the various service academies for mid-grade officers. I was an FS-02. I was eight years into my career. I taught political science there, had a wonderful experience.

And when I retired I looked at another job, because I hadn't thought about the Naval Academy. Someone there who had known me when I was there in the early Eighties happened to read a book review in the Times Literary Supplement of a book that I had written about medieval Iran.

You probably couldn't guess it, but I'm really at heart a medievalist. The Foreign Service is actually quite nice that way. You have people with so many different specialties. We are not all international relations majors by any means. We have people from so many different backgrounds.

So somebody I knew from 25 years earlier had read this review of the book and happened to call me and said, "We're looking for someone to come up and do something called 'Force Transformation.'" Transformation was a big word in the Defense Department under Secretary Rumsfeld. To this day I'm not quite sure what it means. Transformation means "change," so it was transforming the way we train our future navy and marine officers at the Naval Academy. Changing them specifically so they are better equipped to understand a very complex world that they will operate in, whether it's in combat situations or in a non-combat situation, wherever they are, whether it's Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else.

The interesting piece is that I have a counterpart, there are so-called "transformation chairs" at just about all of the military academies, at West Point, at Air Force, at the Naval Postgraduate School, at the National Defense University, the Naval War College, Army War College, almost all of the military schools and none of them are doing what I'm doing at the Naval Academy. They went in a completely different direction. Transformation, for them, means things like cyber warfare, network warfare, management. The other military schools went out and hired systems engineers, MBAs, and people from those kinds of background.

And the Naval Academy looked at it differently, said, "We operate in this difficult world. We operate in a complex interagency environment, international organization environment. We want somebody with that kind of experience."

So my friend said, "I'm looking for somebody to do that. You know anybody?" I said, "I just might know somebody who will be available to do that." As one of the side benefits, I get to teach classes up there. So I've been teaching some marvelous undergraduates.

Q: Talk just a bit about what you are transforming and then some of the courses you're teaching and your impression of your students.

LIMBERT: Let me give you an example that I use with the students. These students pretty much know what they're going to be doing when they graduate. In that sense they're unusual for a group of undergraduates. They're going to be commissioned officers, either on a ship or flying airplanes, on a submarine or leading a platoon of marines somewhere.

They have very heavy responsibilities as a 22-year-old. If you're the leader of a platoon of marines, you're responsible for the lives of thirty-some people. I think what I was like at 22. That would have been very frightening.

And part of doing that is understanding the situation you are in. So that, for example, if you lead your unit, into Najaf, a city in Iraq, what can you expect? What do you know about that place and what does that mean for you and your platoon? So if you encounter a crowd there, is that crowd going to be friendly, is it going to be hostile, is it going to be neutral? And how do you react, not only in a way that furthers your mission but also in a way that protects you and your people? That's an example of the kind of thing we do as transformation, to transform the way we train our future officers.

Q: I would think that you could give them, in the simplest terms, how to ask questions. In other words, don't just assume things but seek out, how to you judge and ask questions?

LIMBERT: That's right. In a way it's similar to what we expect of a Foreign Service Officer: curiosity, to have an open mind about things. You will see things and encounter things that you may not understand. And when you do, how do you figure out a situation? How do you deal with an unfamiliar situation in the best way possible? I saw an example of that the other day. Some units were in southern Afghanistan, in a Pashto-speaking region of Afghanistan, and in those regions, unfortunately, the custom is that some older men and little boys go off on Thursday afternoon for some unauthorized activities. When the American officer there found out about this he was just outraged: "We can't have this!" Well, somebody got to him and said, "Excuse me, sir, you need to operate in this country. You need the cooperation of these people. If our operation here is going to succeed, you're not in a position to judge rightness or wrongness. This may be repugnant to you. It's certainly repugnant to everybody but that's not the point."

Have you seen the film The Kite Runner? It's amazing. The book was on the bestseller lists for years. Have you seen the movie? You'll see this kind of cultural clash that goes on. These are not easy decisions.

You ask students, "What do you do in a situation like that?" This is child abuse. This is pretty awful stuff.

Q: I would think, John, looking at the people who come into the Naval Academy, as always, military people tend to come very much from the South, from certain backgrounds, often I won't say necessarily fundamentalists but very strong of Christian background and all, a firm set of standards. In a way you're trying to break them down, to say, "Okay, in the Fiji Islands or somewhere else you've got to put your own cultural norms aside and take a look at the culture." For an 18-22-year-old person, it's kind of hard to get them to think differently, isn't it?

LIMBERT: Actually, for an 18 to 22-year-old it's much easier to get them to think differently than it is for a 45-year-old. I taught a course part time over at the National Defense University, where we teach people who are GS-15's, colonels, navy captains, people 15, 16, 20 years into their Foreign Service Officers, FS-01's, people who are 15, 20 years into their careers, and who've done well in their careers. They're not going to change the way they do things. They're set in their ways. What they have done so far has worked for them. With 18 to 20-year-olds, it's different. That's why I enjoy what I'm doing. I would pay them to go over there, because, yes, the tradition is conservative but this is the military. It's not like the State Department. In the State Department you give an order and people say, "Well, let's talk about that. Let's see if we can reach consensus on this issue." The military doesn't work that way and it shouldn't work that way. That's the reality.

But what is gratifying is that these young people are open to change and to different ways of doing things. I teach a course about the U.S. and Iran, for example. Well, for most of these students, Iran is the embodiment of something evil. It represents fanaticism, it represents violence, it represent terrorism, anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, denial that there are homosexuals in Iran, on and on and on, all of these terrible things. What is interesting is leading them through and thinking, "Well, there's something else out there. There's another reality and let's look at this reality." And they come to this on their own. I don't have to tell them. That's the nice thing. I'm not fighting with them. One of my students at the end of the class said, "When I came in, I thought the only thing to do with Iranians was to bomb them and now it's not that way. I see this as a lot more complicated and difficult than I thought it was."

I guess my point is these students will surprise you with what they come up with. Actually, you mention people from the South, and that may be true in the other service academies, At the Naval Academy instead you get a lot of people from what's known as the Great Middle: people from Kansas, Illinois, Iowa. I guess they're tired of

Q: Waving fields of grain are all right, but let's see some blue water!

LIMBERT: That's right, see some blue water and see something a little different.

It's a real joy, because their minds are so open. I asked some of my colleagues about this, my military colleagues, because our faculty is about half military officers. They all enjoy teaching there because these people are not yet socialized into the military culture, and their minds are stuck open.

Q: Well, John, I think that's probably a good place to stop and I want to thank you very much.

End of interview