

JOHN T. BENNETT AND THOMAS STERN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This is the revision of an interview found on the CDROM "Frontline Diplomacy"]

Q: Today is October 2, 1987. This is an interview with John Bennett and Thomas Stern concerning the operation of the American embassy [in Korea] from 1975-1979. Tom Stern was DCM from 1976-79. John Bennett was the economic counselor from 1975-78. I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. I was the consul general from 1976-1979. This interview is taking place at the Gelman Library of George Washington University.

To begin with, John, you were the first one of the three of us to come here. How were you assigned to Korea?

BENNETT: Over my dead body! (Laughs)

Q: You didn't want to come?

BENNETT: Well, I'd been evacuated from Saigon in May.

Q: May of 1975.

BENNETT: Right, in '75. I started getting phone calls in Manila saying they wanted me to go to Korea, and I said, "Hell, no. I'll talk about it when I get back to Washington. I went back to Washington and got the ambassador in Jamaica to ask for me as his DCM. Then the system said no, I had to go to Korea or Geneva. I said, "Well, I'll go to Korea." Q: Why not Geneva?

BENNETT: I'd have been bored to tears. As it turned out, it was good assignment, so I'm not...

Q: What was your concern about Korea?

BENNETT: Well, I didn't want another economic job. I wanted to get into the program direction cone if I could.

Q: In other words, to become deputy chief of mission.

BENNETT: Yes. I'd previously been interested in Korea, but I didn't know that much about it.

Q: Were you concerned with you and your family, that you also were within 30 miles of a rather hostile group?

BENNETT: No.

Q: Tom, how did you get assigned to Korea as DCM a year later?

STERN: I got there through the typical Foreign Service assignment. Dick Ericson, who was then the DCM, wanted very badly to come home for personal reasons. I had known the ambassador slightly...

Q: This was Dick Sneider?

STERN: Dick Sneider, right. So, when we heard that Ericson wanted to come home, we worked out a swap. I was at the time a deputy director of the Bureau of Political Military Affairs [PM]. He was assigned to my position and I was assigned to his position. I knew nothing about Korea, except that it was allegedly a dangerous place. But Ericson knew nothing about PM, so that made us even. (Laughs)

BENNETT: Let me add something to this. The reason I was chosen to go to Korea, in part, was because the AID Director had also been economic counselor and supervised the commercial counselor and the agricultural attaché<sup>1/2</sup>, and all those economic activities. They were beginning to phase the AID program out, so at least the theory was that I was also going to be AID director when I went. That did not take place. They finally ended up with an AID representative. But it made some sense in terms of my own particular experience because I'd been deputy director in a couple of AID missions. There was a thought that I might be more acceptable for the AID bureaucracy. (Laughs) This will go on my record. (Laughs)

Q: This is one of those negotiations that's rather important with the State Department.

BENNETT: It didn't work, however. (Laughs)

Q: Why didn't it work?

BENNETT: AID refused to make me the AID Director. So that was the end of it.

Q: This was after you got to the post?

BENNETT: Yes. Well, it was not settled when I went, although Habib, in fact, promised it to me that way and gave me all kinds of assurances about what I was going to have.

Q: Was Philip Habib the ambassador? BENNETT: No, he was the Assistant Secretary.

Q: Assistant Secretary. Who was the ambassador, when you went there in 1975?

BENNETT: Dick Sneider.

Q: Dick Sneider.

STERN: I might just compare the two because mine is a good illustration of sound career planning, whereas his [Bennett's] was just happenstance.

BENNETT: Another Habib specialty. (Laughs)

Q: In other words, Philip Habib was the...

STERN: Well, Habib in one case and Sneider in the other case. That's how career planning and assignments are made in the Department of State.

Q: Somebody you know and trust. (Laughs)

STERN: It had nothing to do with either career planning or promotion, advancement and little with country or functional expertise.

Q: In other words, neither of you then were really put there because Korea is a potential hot spot, you know a lot about Korea, and you're there to do something about it.

BENNETT: Certainly not me. My knowledge of Korea wasn't why I wathere, my knowledge of AID and economics was why I was there.

STERN: I had some knowledge of political-military affairs anparticularly security assistance.

Q: Well, that would make sense. It was considered a political-military...it was considered a major factor of our relationship with Korea then.

STERN: If it wasn't then, it became after I arrived there.

BENNETT: It was before you got there. (Laughs) I'll forget this story, but just before I went, one of the few friends I talked to was Bill Lewis.

Q: Bill Lewis is now at the Sino-Soviet Institute at GeorgWashington University.

BENNETT: Yes. He was working for the Sneider job people.

STERN: He was working as Special Assistant to the Under Secretarfor Security Assistance in the State Department.

BENNETT: Yes. Bill wanted to know why we weren't going to take the troops out. I said, "I don't know, don't ask me." But this tells you something about the climate of opinion in Washington.

Q: This is post-Vietnam.

BENNETT: Post-Vietnam, pre-Carter.

Q: This is pre-Carter. This is the Ford administration at this time. What was the view of Korea that you picked up when you went out in 1975? How did you view American policy towards Korea when you went out?

BENNETT: I'm trying to encapsulate that in short enough terms. My immediate concern was that we were phasing down the AID mission. So that was a problem that I had to worry about. This other problem of the military assistance, a military relationship with Korea, was obviously becoming an issue and was to be, I suppose, the paramount issue for the next three years for us.

Overall, I think there was a feeling that the Koreans had done very well, although they still had some problems, and that, except on the political side, things were going along pretty well.

[Because the original interview left out matters that John Bennett thinks were important from his tour in Korea, he is going to add several comments in brackets interspersed in the original interview. These were written in December, 1999.]

BENNETT: "My view at the time of my assignment that the Koreans had done well was not shared by the public or by everybody in Washington. The "miracle" was not widely apparent and the press. Dick Halloran, the New York Times correspondent in Tokyo who traveled to Korea every few months, was typical. He would write about the weakness of the economy, particularly as it affected the loans of the New York banks, the poverty, and the lack of democratic practices or human rights. One of my first objectives was to determine just how strong the economy was and to get the embassy's reporting to reflect that judgment.

This involved initially getting to know the players. These were the bureaucrats who did the economic planning and the big businessmen (the chaebol), directed ultimately by the President, Park Chung Hee. Park drove the process by personally setting national goals, negotiating deals right down to the details with the chaebol, and presiding over the system in, for example, monthly meetings with the economic bureaucrats and business representatives - the chaebol and the business associations that included much smaller companies.

The meetings were the formal process. In addition, much was done informally at a lower level, with the economic ministries, the Economic Planning Board (EPB), and the Blue House economic secretaries.

The players were an impressive lot. The chaebol were generally self-made and not well-educated as their successors would be, but they had succeeded in Korean terms - they had been tested and those found wanting were simply cut off by the bureaucrats. The government planners in EPB, the think tanks like the Korea Development Institute, and the Blue House were well-educated, mostly in economics in the U.S., and highly motivated - true professionals or technocrats. Lower level bureaucrats in the ministries were less able and sometimes corrupt but were effective in the system that evolved under Park with the direction of the technocrats.

The planning system was highly centralized, and started with an overall five-year plan which set growth targets based on the need to provide jobs and allow for growing productivity among those already employed. This gave rise to growth targets of 7-8 percent which were generally met, if not exceeded and there had not been a single year of negative growth since 1957, before Park took over.

The overall plan was modified each year to take account of actual conditions, like the availability of investment funds and world market demand for Korean exports and these were encapsulated in annual trade, finance, and industry plans that became the marching orders for the ministries and businessmen. Progress on the plans was tracked by the government, most regularly in the monthly meetings with the president. These meetings provided an opportunity for the operators to raise issues of policy (e.g., the exchange rate or the interest rate) and to identify bottlenecks (e.g., the availability of bank credit).

Implementation was primarily through the banking system, which was initially government-owned and later, after the government sold off most of its bank shares, government-controlled. The government evolved a system in which financing was routinely available against export letters of credit and for low-cost policy loans to be used for priority manufacturing sectors. The government also exerted control through authorizations to firms to enter particular product areas (e.g., small, medium, or large diesel engines) and to expand capacity by set amounts.

This system has fallen into disrepute in recent times, particularly after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and was always subject to criticism from free market advocates. But it had worked very well earlier. Even when it had severe problems following the first and second oil shocks, and rising wages in the late 80s, it had recovered very quickly and became very difficult to reform in the absence of a crisis. Indeed, Korea's current recovery has been the most rapid in East Asia, which may make reform harder in the end.

At one time in a briefing for Time magazine editors, I described Park's economic system as "Korea Inc." That description, however, fails to take account of the single national hierarchical nature of the planning and execution process and of the military practices incorporated into it as well. Anyone who has sat through a Pentagon military and a Korean economic briefing will note the similarities. In sum, as for economic planning and execution, Korea was run as a single company or military unit, with management by objective (verifiable goals with precise dates as deadlines) and a verification of performance on a real time basis (e.g., daily reports on exports and imports from the trade portals of the country reported back to Seoul).

Getting to know the players in Korea involved not only formal calls, but a succession of social occasions, golf (tennis occasionally) on weekends and sometimes during the week, receptions, and lunches. One of my Korean business colleagues told me that he spent almost all of his time socializing with other businessmen, government officials, and incidentally, one embassy or another - that that was his role in the business. The assigned foreign dragon handlers were evident in the other chaebol as well, usually American educated and good English speakers. For me, it was a succession of social occasions that curtailed family life, like that of my Korean male colleagues. One solution was to take my wife to the receptions; though few wives came, there were always a few women there, and Marinka knew all the men as well.

The government economists were the easiest to get to know. They accepted lunch invitations freely and were willing to talk very openly, particularly in small groups. I early evolved the habit of recording these conversations as memoranda of conversation - they didn't have to be cleared or edited by a third party and became a record of current shifts in government economic concerns, but also of my own growing understanding of how Korea worked. Reporting all of this became a major preoccupation of mine, almost from the beginning. It was both a matter of exploring how Korea worked and reporting it in order to establish a reasonable level of confidence in its system and also in establishing a level of confidence that the embassy was on top of the situation.

The chaebol were more difficult. Samsung, Lucky-Goldstar, and Daewoo appointed senior executives from the president's office to deal with the embassy, whereas the son of the founder of Sanyo, who had just succeeded to the number one role on the death of his father, came to call on me, accompanied by his two uncles - a formal rite of passage, to introduce the new chief to the business community. Several of the declining companies used their top people to cultivate the embassy - I became aware that they were having troubles with the government and concluded they sought us out as possible protection. But none were not very informative unless one knew what questions to ask - then they were quite forthright, as were the government officials, if asked.

The Blue House secretaries were the most difficult to approach. Depending on the period, they sought to stay out of the direct line of discussions, except to deal with the ambassador, as did the deputy prime minister (the minister of economic planning and head of the EPB). Earlier relationships would later prove to be difficult - when old friends were promoted and I ran the Korea Economic Institute in Washington on behalf of the Korea Development Institute, it was resented that I would call on them - personal relationships did not outweigh bureaucratic ones.

Occasionally, formal relationships were pushed aside by sheer necessity. I had made a lunch date with a senior Hyundai executive with whom I had become good friends. At the last minute, it was changed to a formal meeting with the chairman to be followed by lunch with him. The meeting turned out to include some 40 of Hyundai's senior executives, but the conversation (as well as the lunch) was almost exclusively with the chairman. Still, I remained puzzled about the purpose of the meeting, except that after a good lunch, he indicated he would like to call on me. When he did, it turned out that the first of the VLCC crude oil tankers he had built was being refused by the contracted Greek buyer - the tanker market had gone sour and the Greek had found a way to wiggle out of the deal. Would I intervene with Gulf-Korea to get them to buy it and use it to bring crude to Korea? I agreed to discuss it and the local Gulf people with whom we had good relations, accepted. I thought the problem was solved. Six months later, I got a call from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, summoning me to a meeting with a Director General of Industry on an unspecified subject. The subject turned out to be the unsold tanker. In a really unpleasant meeting - the DG, obviously under great pressure, began yelling and never stopped - it transpired that Gulf had done nothing but refer the matter back to the U.S. Its shipping subsidiary there had declined to accept the ship. I went back to Gulf to ask what had happened and noted that its future in Korea was now in jeopardy. The tanker got bought.

In addition to my talking to all of these groups, the ambassador also talked to them when he had the time and believed it was important. Sneider (and Gleysteen at the end of my tour) were very good about this and I was able to get both Korean and American businessmen in to see them. They were also good about accepting invitations and making speeches to groups. Indeed, I learned a lesson from Sneider early on - American businessmen were never going to be fully content with the attention and results they got from the embassy, but spending time with them was still important - it kept them off your back or at least lessened the pressure.

The Commercial Section and the agricultural attaché took some of the pressure off me as well, in terms of dealing with both Korean and American businessmen. It was important to inculcate a service mentality into our people from the beginning and I think they responded very well. I spent a lot of time with both, discussing their problems, suggesting possible solutions, following up, and getting personally involved where the issue warranted. I had confidence in both the American and the Korean employees. I expected the Americans to be good at their jobs, but the Koreans turned out to be happily outstanding in theirs - perhaps most surprisingly, the women, real professionals, who had found a niche in the embassy that was denied them in the Korean economy.

One feature of our Seoul embassy was the Trade Center. This was largely run by our Korean employees and gave us a regular means to meet with the broader business community. American companies used it to make connections and to demonstrate their products and Korean companies to find sources of American products. We had a regular schedule of trade shows and the facilities were also useful in providing U.S. visitors with their own space to work in and meet contacts. Although both the ambassador and I got involved in formal openings, the Center tended to work pretty much on automatic pilot so that we were freed to do other work. Its activities were well covered by the Korean press.

So much in Korea is done on a personal basis, that it is worth taking note of. Phone calls rarely were useful to transact business, other than to make an appointment for a personal call. Senior Koreans almost always met embassy officers in the company of several of their assistants, who, however, rarely said anything. Negotiations, such as over trade matters, were highly formalized and could rarely be rushed. Sometimes negotiations went on right to the VIP departure lounge at the airport - and on one occasion, having reached agreement only moments before, were reopened on the boarding ramp.

One feature of Korea that I and several of my colleagues found troubling was the business of gift giving. A long established feature of Korean society, it seemed nevertheless to have got out of hand. I and one of my subordinates decided to try to cut it back by returning some rather expensive objects - only to find that the giver took deep offense and was unavailable for months after. Since he had been a particularly close friend and source, it was a real loss. The Department's practice of having gifts turned in was retrospectively, a much better solution.

Q: What about on the political side? Was there much concern at that time about what we tend to call "human rights" and "movement towards democracy?"

BENNETT: Yes, there was. That was an underlying anxiety then and that remained [an] anxiety until today.

Q: But did you have any instructions about how to do anything about this?

BENNETT: I don't think so. I think that goes with being an American Foreign Service officer. (Laughs) You worry about these issues. You take them as they come. Some are going to rise up and have to be dealt with, and others will glide along, and you just have to wait until the time is propitious.

Q: You say the AID was phasing out. What were we phasing out? What had we been doing there close to the time when you arrived?

BENNETT: Well, you had a large AID mission which had shrunk in size. Most of it was providing technical assistance or administering various loan and other AID programs. There were residual loans. One was signed by the AID Director, the last one just before I got there. Then there was PL480, and I don't even remember how much money was involved in that, but it wasn't very much. Substantially less, at this point. It was clear that the AID mission was going to be essentially phased out as these existing loans, the pipeline of funds, were spent. If there were going to be any further PL480 assistance, that would probably get phased [out].

The large past AID role in Korea actually made a lot of connections for me. It had been responsible for setting up a string of government think-tanks using counterpart (local currency or won) generated by its financing of commercial imports, paid for by AID and generating won when they were sold in Korea - these had to be spent for mutually agreed activities. These institutions were run by American-trained Koreans. They gave us access to government thinking in science, agriculture, education, health, family planning, and economics. These institutions became the sources of reform and the most progressive Korean thinking in their fields. Even though AID was being phased out, the mission had been a help to these groups in government and they continued to seek comfort and moral support from us even when we were no longer providing financing."

Q: PL480...

BENNETT: Public Law 480, under which so-called surplus agricultural commodities are given or sold to foreign countries as a form of assistance.

STERN: Let me answer the same set of questions because I have a slightly different perspective on this. This is a year later, but the subject of Korea and security assistance is one that I had been familiar with for a number of years, having worked on it since 1973. Bill Lewis, who John mentioned, was working for an under secretary by the name of Carl Maw. Carl Maw was essentially Kissinger's private lawyer and spent very little time on the subject of security assistance. He was not that interested in it, and he had many other things he had to take care of.

Q: What sort of things?

STERN: I do not know. There were many other things which he had to take care of.

So, essentially it was Bill Lewis and I...My first supervisor was Sy Weiss, whose main interest in the political-military field was in East-West relationships - U.S.-U.S.S.R. relationships - disarmament, questions of that kind. He also was not very interested in security assistance. My second supervisor was George Vest, who's now Director-General of the Foreign Service, who although more interested in this subject, was just breaking in and had a lot of other things on his plate. The question of security assistance and the allocation of some scarce resources were essentially left to Bill Lewis and myself. In that context, the name Korea came up quite frequently because Korea had come a long way economically. There was a persistent question of how much longer, if indeed any longer, it could be eligible for security assistance. We had, from an economic point of view, far needier cases that we had to satisfy. On the other hand, Korea was facing this tremendous military force north of its border. We were always quite aware of the potential damage that even a reduction, much less a cut-off, of security assistance might do to the political stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Q: Can I ask when you were saying security assistance, you're talking about military arms sold or given or...?

STERN: No. Security assistance actually comes in the form of cash. It's a draw down against which the recipient country buys military weapons, hardware or even training or uniforms, depending on the program agreed upon with the U.S. military component in the country, usually the Military Assistance Group. The role of the State Department was one of essentially being the policy maker and usually the final judge in the Executive Branch of the size of the program. The role of the military was to assist in the procurement of what the American military and the Korean military had agreed upon as a sensible program.

BENNETT: Let me add a couple of things to that because I think there [are] some distinctions there. One, in many cases, it's not just a question of money, it's also a question of what weapons are you going to get. That breaks down into another thing. In the Korean case, they were manufacturing some themselves, and then you had to have the technology transfer to manufacture it. So, what we mostly call military assistance really encompasses some of these other things that are not strictly assistance, but are of equal concern.

Q: It's all one package, really.

BENNETT: Right. It should be and it's all related in one or another margins.

STERN: Let me make one point here, though. John is right, it is one package. But it is not a package that the State Department plays an equal role in. That is to say, it plays a leading role in the allocation of the resources. It plays a very subsidiary role, or no role at all, in the actual procurement of the weapons. What the State Department receives from the Pentagon in support of an allocation is an illustrative program, which may or may not have any bearing in the final analysis on what is actually procured. This has always been a very difficult subject. It was difficult both in Washington and in the embassy. In neither place had we much knowledge of the kind of hardware that the Koreans were actually procuring, either with U.S. or Korean money. Much of our knowledge came either from the American military or by sheer accident. By sheer accident, I include intelligence. It was not a very neat operation, either in Korea or anywhere else.

BENNETT: But I would also carry that one step back, one step further, which is that the State Department did play a significant role in the threat analysis. That also had considerable to do with the selection of weapons and so on.

Q: This is the threat from North Korea?

BENNETT: Yes.

STERN: John is theoretically correct, but as we get to the story a little bit later, when both of us were there at the same time, it is not at all clear that the threat analysis was the driving force behind either weapon acquisition or as John suggested before, domestic weapons development. There were other forces that drove a second set of issues, which we'll get to as the story develops chronologically.

Q: Why don't we pursue this as a theme, rather than to gchronologically. Let's talk about security assistance.

STERN: Well, it's real hard because there are things that happened between '75 and '77-'78 which are not related to security assistance, but which had a major impact on the security assistance. One of the issues, that you started to pursue and I think we ought to continue, is this question of troop withdrawal. We should let John proceed.

Q: Let's talk then about the troop withdrawal movement. We're now back, in the first place, in '75 under the Ford administration, when you came there and then, Tom, if you'll move into it. How did this as a theme develop?

BENNETT: Well, as indicated, I was sort of surprised to hear Bill Lewis raise this question. It was a question that had never occurred to me at this point in my knowledge. Then I get out to Korea, and I think it was an issue from the time I got there. We had this "A" division...

Q: Second division...

BENNETT: ...Second Division, plus some other support groups - AiForce and Navy units, and missile units...

STERN: It was a reinforced division.

BENNETT: Well, it was a reinforced division, plus a lot of other things. If I remember correctly, the issue came up within two weeks from the time that Carter declared his candidacy in...January of '75? I think I'm correct because the election was '76, and he ran for quite a while before that. At any rate, as I remember it was an issue from almost the moment I got there, which was August of '75. I may not be correct on that.

You have to treat it in the context. Vietnam had just fallen, you had the Nixon Doctrine, which said that countries had to make more of an effort to help themselves because the U.S. couldn't afford to do the military effort that it had been doing, and Nixon had previously withdrawn a division of troops from Korea in 197...2? I think that's right. So, there was a history. The Koreans just became the leitmotif through my whole period there, and I guess through Tom's, in the sense that no conversation almost or never with a Korean failed to touch on the issue of troop withdrawal and how devastating this was for the Koreans.

It is important to add that Nixon and Kissinger had made up with the PRC in 1972. The Koreans reacted to this just as the Japanese had - the "Nixon shock." It created tremendous uncertainty about whether the U.S. could be counted on.

Q: What was the concern, that if we...?

BENNETT: Well, the concern, very bluntly, was they were going to be left to face the North Koreans alone, and that this would almost certainly in their minds assure another Northern attack, and in their minds a defeat in the South. This whole discussion got more and more involved. Some people on the American side would argue that we could take out the division and leave an Air Force facility so that we could run planes back in and bomb the hell out of North Korea if they attacked. That would be certainly sufficient to win the war and therefore to deter the North. The Koreans, I think, rightfully saw, at that time at least, that a ground presence - a substantial ground presence - committed the American side to come to Korea's aid in case of attack. But in some absolute sense, there was no way to extricate forty thousand men (laughs) and get out of Korea. We couldn't have done it, and politically in the United States, obviously under those circumstances, we would not have been able to do it.

I think the most important part, and it took me a long time to reach this conclusion, what you really are after in Korea is deterrence. The bigger the force on the South side, and the clearer the commitment of the Americans to Korea in case of an attack, the better the deterrent. I haven't gone through all these things. It was always possible that the South could hold off the North by itself, but I always believed, and I still believe, that the North would never attack without some considerable assurance from China and the Soviet Union of support. Because these guys are sitting there with tons and tons of munitions, and they hear that from Day 1 they're going to start firing it just as fast as they can and as they have targets. They're going to run out of things very quickly. And without assurance of resupply, the North - essentially the Russians would resupply, but some from China as well, the South from the U.S. side - neither side could feel certain that it would survive, much less prevail without that.

There's an interesting parallel that just occurred to me, that we had Vietnam, in which when the North Vietnamese won, they took over enormous stocks of weapons in the South. Yet, for the last four months in Vietnam, we heard nothing but complaints about the fact that they didn't have enough of this, or enough of that. Well, what they were doing was hoarding stuff. They'd have been better off if they hadn't hoarded it, but I think when you get into that kind of situation, you do have a "hoarding" mentality, and it really ends up tying one hand behind your back. But I think the Koreans were right about this. They really were uptight. I still think, I don't know whether it's a division, but that some sort of clear commitment from the U.S. side is essential to [deter] the North.

Q: Tom, how did you...

STERN: To pick up the story 18 months later...

Q: This was still...

STERN: This was before the 1976 election, but well into the campaign. Although not a prominent part of Carter's campaign, a well-known factor was the desire by the democratic presidential aspirant to withdraw the Second Division. By the time I had arrived in Seoul, which was July 1, 1976, there was considerable doubt in the Koreans' minds, as I think John indicated, about our reliability and our commitment to their security. Everybody in the embassy was filled with stories of what catastrophes would happen if the Second Division were withdrawn from Korea.

BENNETT: We should go one step further, though, because the original Carter commitment to pull troops out took many different forms. One of the possibilities, we would take everybody out, not just the Second Division. And people worried about that as well. It's hard for me to remember all of the changes this thing went through over the period that I was there, but there were substantial changes.

STERN: Let me just add one thing. The Carter policy position was never really fleshed out. It was one of these campaign statements, "We should get out of Korea." He never talked about why, or how, and when, and what would be the quid pro quos. It was just campaign rhetoric.

Q: Was there any sort of intellectual base behind this, or was this just a part of an anti-Vietnam...?

BENNETT: Oh yes. Here again, a whole bunch of things played - the human rights record is one of them. But the fundamental concern was that we would be committed to a war without any ability to make a choice on our side - we were there, if it started, we were involved. Many people simply didn't like that automatic commitment.

STERN: Perhaps most important of all, however, was that polls consistently indicated that the United States should not come to the assistance of South Korea in case of a North Korean invasion. That was true then, it is even true today, although perhaps somewhat ameliorated. But certainly in the 1975-76 period, there was no support in this country for a repeat of the 1950 history. So Carter was in some respects playing to his audience...

BENNETT: Playing to a popular will (laughs)...

STERN: ...or reflecting the audience's views.

Q: But let's take the other side of the coin. Gerald Ford was President. Was he defending our policy? Were you reporting what the consequences could be and any effort made to refute this...?

STERN: Let John answer the question about reporting. I don't think that Ford made much of a stand on this issue because he had read the polls as well as Carter had. I'm sure the State Department put out some statements saying that this was a crazy idea, but it never really became a campaign issue per se.

Q: This was not an issue that was jarring.

STERN: No, no.

BENNETT: No. It was simply a commitment that he made in passing. Then after he got into office, he decided (laughs) he had to execute it.

STERN: That's a long history, too, which we ought to get into. The interesting part about this is that today it is hard to find the father of that idea. It's like you can't find a Nazi in Germany, you can't find the father of the Second Division withdrawal proposal in the United States today. All the alleged fathers have run for cover.

BENNETT: Okay, that's fair enough. I just think it was sort of an idea that seemed worth considering at the time, given all the other things that had happened, and that kind of hope generated a life of its own.

STERN: Sure.

BENNETT: And then after people looked at it for a while, they realized that it was not a great idea. It was one of those things that initially looked attractive and looked worse and worse, the longer you looked at it.

Q: How did we deal with the Koreans? Obviously, let's do it before and after the 1976 election. Obviously, this was a black cloud hovering over them. Here we were, the embassy, reflecting our commitment and then on comes a new president who has a "decommitment" commitment.

BENNETT: I'm trying to remember. Although this was a salient issue on the Korean side, I don't think we did much reporting on it, other than, let's say, '75. But I think we got more worried about it, once Carter really began talking in terms of making good on it.

In retrospect, it is interesting to me that so many Koreans raised the issue of troop withdrawal with me. I would not have expected that they thought I was relevant, that I had any influence. So the subject was very important in their minds. In a way they were right - this issue came up frequently in our almost daily senior staff meetings with the ambassador and we discussed how to handle it. We had to walk an awkward tight rope - sounding sympathetic to Korean concerns while not being disloyal to our president and at the same time, being reassuring, telling the Koreans that they were not alone. But dealing with the issue in terms of Washington was more difficult. I suppose I wrote about it in memoranda of conversation. And I know the ambassador discussed it with our military. He must also have written about it in back channel messages.

Another feature of my assignment was dealing with the military, both American and Korean. The Koreans were those designated as "foreign devil handlers" and it was disconcerting to all of us that the American military were kept out of much of the thinking on the Korean side. They were a personable bunch, but the content of our discussions was minimal - still it was important to know that we were getting so little from them.

On the American side, I got to know Stilwell who went out of his way to cultivate embassy officers below the ambassador - he had not been quite so outgoing in Vietnam where I had crossed his path before. His successor, Jack Vessey, struck all of us as much more genuine, no-nonsense and sensible - perhaps it came from rising from the ranks. The most memorable of the generals was Hollingsworth or Holly for short, the I Corps commander who liked to entertain visitors with talk about "his killing ground" along the frontier north of Seoul and who, as the guest speaker at an American Chamber of Commerce luncheon on his departure, arrived in fatigues and made a great show of unstrapping his forty-fives and holsters, and plunking them down on the rostrum before beginning to talk. His successor, Jack Cushman, struck me as less of a showman, but he loved to parade the fact that he was studying Korean - at his farewell, he gave some of his parting remarks in Korean, only to have Jack Vessey who was not known to have studied Korean, trump his play, by giving his remarks in Korean - it made everyone laugh.

Cushman did a very useful thing, in setting up a war game involving all his Korean units and playing out a northern invasion. I got to participate from the embassy. It went on for three days, played in real time and showed that units would have made decisions that were mutually inconsistent, as when they moved material and men in contrary directions on the same single lane road. The demoralization among the Korean officers in the game was so great that it had to be ended with a face-saving solution that left the South winners. Still, it taught very useful lessons and was repeated in subsequent years. It also of course, made everyone much more concerned about the northern threat.

Q: This was after he was elected in November of 1976.

BENNETT: Yes. This, obviously, is outside of my field, in the sense that I was doing the economic-commercial stuff until I got involved with how much can the Koreans support on their own from their own resources. What kind of level of performance could we expect out of them was another sort of element. With the AID program phasing down, or phasing out, that looked like another crutch that was being removed, or another support from the American side. So that added to the anxiety about the removal of the military.

STERN: On the political-military side, the issue was not a daily subject for reporting, but periodically, we would report a conversation we had with high government officials. The U.S. military certainly did a considerable amount of reporting on this subject.

One of the things that helped us out was Major General John H. Singlaub, of current fame [this being 1987], but of unknown quality or quantity to the embassy at the time he arrived in Korea. He arrived in Seoul on the same plane as I did. Singlaub took it upon himself to challenge Carter publicly on this whole question of troop withdrawal. That helped to raise the issue in both public and private channels. It got raised, unfortunately, in public channels, not as an issue to be decided on its own, but primarily an issue of a subordinate officer challenging his superior officer, the Commander-in-Chief. The nature of the objection was somewhat lost in the dialogue about the broader issue. I have to remind you, however, that Singlaub challenged Carter twice.

Q: This was after Carter was elected.

STERN: Yes, after Carter was elected. The first time was in late '77 and the second time, I believe, was in early 1978. After the first time, he was requested by the commanding general in Korea, General John Vessey, not to repeat his comments publicly again. That admonition was not heeded for very long. Sure enough, Jack decided it was time to make waves again, and so he repeated his public opposition to the troop withdrawal.

What I'm saying is that we didn't need to report very much on it, although we did, periodically, because deus ex machina had entered into the picture, and had brought the issue squarely to the front without our initiation.

Q: You talk about reporting. It implies that the embassy had a very passive role, in a way. How about with the Koreans? Tom, you were dealing with the Koreans.

STERN: With the Koreans our line was, "Look, the decision has not actually been made yet. Settle down, don't get too upset. Don't do anything rash." Because one of the things we were worried about all the time was a preemptive strike. Let me just pursue that a second.

Q: A preemptive strike on whom?

STERN: By the South Koreans against the North. To go back to the question of weapon acquisition, we were very loath to permit the Koreans to buy weapons which could be used for what we call, jokingly, the "offensive mode," because we were never quite sure that in fact they would not be used for those purposes. The theory of a first-strike was one that was voiced, if not frequently, at least often enough by the Korean military and some civilians, to give us some concern. One of the issues about which we were particularly sensitive concerned long-range missiles - missiles which could, from the DMZ or even from Seoul, hit Pyongyang. We did our best to prevent the Koreans from acquiring any missiles or components thereof, which they could put together. The rest of this story is classified.

Q: Well, let's not talk classified. How about on the American military side, did they have the same concerns, or was this more a State Department concern?

STERN: In this particular area, they had the same concerns. They did not have the capability, though, of monitoring what in fact was going on in the missile development program. There were some very amusing aspects of this, because the missile development was going on in an organization which was headed by a former teacher of Park Chung Hee's daughter, who through his association with her, had direct access to the Blue House and to the President himself.

Q: The Blue House is the President's [of Korea] house.

STERN: The Blue House is the President's house.

BENNETT: It is always interesting to me because there were enough Americans around...I remember seeing one of these damn things! They'd fire it off - I was down in Taechon Beach, when I looked up, and there this damn thing goes across the sky.

Q: A missile?

BENNETT: Yes.

STERN: Yes. But they were not long-range. Those were anti-aircraft missiles.

BENNETT: Tom (laughs), when it comes off the horizon on one side and goes down the horizon on the other, that's not short-range. (Laughs)

STERN: (Laughs) Well, if you can see it going down it is short-range...

BENNETT: You can't see it going down. All I can see is it going over the horizon. (Laughs)

STERN: Well, nevertheless, things were being done that were not entirely in accordance with our wishes or our policies. But I want to pursue this a little bit because - and I want John to join in in just a second - this whole issue of the division withdrawal created an atmosphere of beleaguering in Seoul. Particularly in the Blue House, where Park Chung Hee began to see himself as standing as Horatio at the bridge, fighting off all the hordes, including his alleged friends. This had considerable economic consequences because this perception, and I want John to amplify this, took Korea off its development direction, which was not in accordance with our views. It had, obviously, considerable impact on both their military acquisition program and their own domestic military hardware development program.

Q: In other words, they were thinking of having to go it alone.

STERN: They were thinking seriously of having to go it alone. And they were beginning to gear their long-range plans on that assumption. As I suggested to you, that led them to go into ventures with which we were not particularly pleased and which had some serious economic impacts.

Q: May I ask one question? When you're talking about all of this, was the analogy of Israel with the preemptive strikes of 1967 before...were the Koreans looking at this? Were we looking at this?

STERN: No, the analogy was not quite that, at least not from my contacts. Most of my contacts were great fans of Israel, but not because of the preemptive strikes [if in fact that's what it was], but because they saw themselves becoming more and more like Israel. That is, surrounded by enemies on all sides, beleaguered, and having to do it on their own. One of the great shocks to the Korean body politic was the day that the Israelis decided to close their embassy in Seoul. That had a real impact on their psychology. An unfortunate impact.

Q: Why did they close their embassy?

STERN: There were two reasons. The official reason was budgetary. I suspect the real reason was that the Koreans had not opened an embassy in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. They were handling their Israeli relations from their embassy in Rome and that asymmetry bothered the Israelis.

Q: Let's move back to the general theme we're talking about of...

STERN: I'd like to have John deal with the consequences of the threat of troop withdrawal on the economic development program, because I think that's a very interesting story.

BENNETT: It's a little bit more confused than what Tom was suggesting in the sense that there was at this point in Korea's economic development some logic in its going to more high technology and heavier industry. In fact, the decision to do some of this probably goes back to the late '60s and early '70s when you had some of the basic decisions like the beginning of production of chemicals, the base for the plastic industry and this sort of thing. The steel industry was started in the early 70s but the decision had been made earlier. The shipbuilding industry - ditto, and these things all relate one to the other. The contrast is with light industry export driven, not very high value-added, not very high skilled but use of big labor input and less capital. Now they are switching to heavy capital-heavy capital and higher technology. This has, obviously, a military content in that if you can build steel then you can build military machines out of steel. Shipbuilding obviously has some naval implications. Ultimately, they were talking about designing their own tank and so on. There were a bunch of problems. One is that it misuses capital. Another is that it presses the available supply of skilled or highly educated people, science people. A third thing is that they get involved in such a wide variety of things that they have problems assimilating them. In fact, some of the economic problems they got into in 1977-78, which were compounded by events in 1979-80 had their origins in this. They just tried to do too many things at one time. Fundamentally they should have been second order things, not first order things. There were other things they could have done better. This plays out today in the sense that some of the economic policies that the opposition attacks the government for doing, and which the government agrees with, had their origins right there. The big companies are in part a consequence of the decision to go this high-tech, high-capital intensive route. And this clearly also then created a composition of trade which made for greater conflicts with the United States in its trade relations. Everything depends on everything else in this.

A good example of this was the planned investment in nuclear power. The capital and foreign exchange costs were enormous at a time when Korea was short of both. Funds invested in nuclear power could have created far more jobs and added far more to GDP in other activities. The Korean government economists fought hard on this issue, as they did more generally on the whole chemical and heavy industry program. Park overruled them. They even got their boss, Deputy Prime Minister Nam Duck Woo, to go to Park about it - for which he got slapped down. Park's argument was that Korea could do it, since the Japanese had. The DPM was not in a position to argue the military aspects, but they were clearly high - uppermost? - in Park's mind - Park was going for as completely independent a military capability as he could manage.

Because American firms were involved in bidding on nuclear plants, I became deeply involved with the issue. The American firms were telling me what was happening and asking for embassy help. The ambassador was engaged because of the known Korean interest in building nuclear weapons and because Washington was on his back. But he was also of a mind that the last thing the South needed were nukes as they would guarantee the North would go for them as well.

The American firms were particularly concerned when the U.S. government put a hold on any technology transfer until we were satisfied that the Koreans had given up their quest for nuclear weapons - the immediate issue was a spent fuel reprocessing plant the French were providing, which we wanted stopped.

STERN: I think one of the lessons here is that before you initiate new policies, you ought to consider all of the consequences, not only those that might get you elected as president, but also those that might fall in your lap if you become the next president.

BENNETT: Or the one after that, or the one after that (laughs).

Q: Perhaps we ought to turn now to the beginning of the Carter administration. What sort of instructions are we getting from the State Department, whose giving the instructions, what do we do at that time?

STERN: The instructions had very little to do with troop withdrawal. The troop withdrawal issue was one that only cropped up occasionally, and then it was usually raised by other concerns, such as Singlaub.

Q: This is within the embassy's work?

STERN: Right. And within the military's work as well. In 1977 the major issues we were dealing with were new ones. The Carter administration, for example, emphasized human rights, and there we were, flooded - that is an overstatement - burdened with messages from the home office about what a bad thing...

BENNETT: blocking all political opposition is.

Q: Let's work on the troop question.

STERN: I mention the human rights issue because it had an effect - I think impact is a little bit too strong - it had an effect on the troop withdrawal issue, and on the provision of security assistance. As you'll recall, the language of the law had been tightened considerably to force the Administration to take the human rights situation into account as it decided how to allocate security assistance. So human rights had a role to play in this whole question of political-military relationship, and on the view of the Koreans about the commitment of the "Big Brother," the United States, to their security and safety.

BENNETT: Which is to say that the human rights issue we had been bragging about, that makes them nervous about our commitment to them in a different dimension.

Q: This means, if we're down about them on human rights, this means a lessening commitment on the military side.

BENNETT: It makes it a more precarious commitment. And they're right. It did have a funny kind of effect. There are a couple of things you should add to this. Carter's in the White House, Cyrus Vance is Secretary of State, Dick Holbrooke is Assistant Secretary for East Asia, and Pat Derian is the zealot for human rights. (laughs) People make a difference in these things. I think Holbrooke was on the defensive at the very least. In fact, I think he was in the offense initially on some of these issues.

Q: You mean he was probably thinking that troop withdrawal was good thing?

BENNETT: I think he was at least not persuaded one way or another. The other part is Pat Derian really felt she had a mandate to go out and make human rights terribly important in American foreign policy. I would argue that it's always been important in American foreign policy, but the issue...she's going to make it more obvious, more egregious. There is one other thing that occurs to me that's worth saying; that is, I think the evolution of the view of the troop issue in the American embassy took some time to crystallize. I can remember long discussions about this and my own questioning from one point of view to the other. What harm did it really do? How did it objectively change the military situation if you take out half a division, or a whole division? I came to the conclusion, and I think the embassy came to the same conclusion...as a group there was a kind of consensus that it was a lousy idea.

When I went back to Washington on transfer to Guatemala, the deputy human rights man called me in. I thought he wanted to talk about Guatemala, but it was all about Korea. I tried to make the case that Korea involved such a set of important issues that conditioning American support would jeopardize our own interests in avoiding war, etc. I was surprised at how civil the discussion was and how receptive he seemed but nothing changed, I suppose because Derian had her own agenda.

STERN: Yes, it was a lousy idea if you assume, as most everybody did, that the North Koreans were unstable and unpredictable. We can go into a long discussion about this. I happen to be in the very great minority on that question, but we can discuss that question later. The point is that John is absolutely right. The proposition to withdraw troops was one that was worthy of exploration and discussion. It did not need to have the knee-jerk reaction that Singlaub had. It was a proposition that could be argued with some merit on both sides, and it depended in part, at least, on your view of the reliability of the North Koreans.

Q: How did those in the embassy view the North Koreans?

BENNETT: Quite capable of doing desperate things. We did not know enough about the North. One of the things that came out of this period is how little we knew about the North. Most of the stuff we thought we knew on the economic side was baloney.

Q: This had to be from CIA at this point?

BENNETT: Yes, that's right.

Q: And you felt that they didn't give you good service?

BENNETT: The effort that we had exerted on North Korea was scanty, was scandalously poor. I was able in about two weeks to learn everything I could about North Korea on the economic side that was worth knowing. It was that poor. That contributes to one's uncertainty about the move to pull the troops out. You don't know who your enemy is. The other part that came out of this was that it became clear that we could not move that division somewhere else and save money. It would not have saved money. It would have cost us a potload of money.

Q: It was a symbolic gesture that would leave us in a more difficult position, and not do what it was supposed to do?

STERN: John raises a very interesting point, because one of the reasons that the military objected so strenuously to the 2nd Division withdrawal was not only that it would cost them a lot of money, but in fact there was no easy home in the U.S. for the division. All the bases in the United States which could have housed that division were already occupied.

Q: Fort Lewis would be the normal place it would go.

STERN: And that was all taken up. The best answer that the military finally came up with is splitting that division into two, having one half at Fort Drum in New York and the other half somewhere in New Jersey. That obviously did not make the military's heart beat with joy. These decisions, although they are discussed on a very high policy level, often come down to the practical realities of the world. In this particular case, this is a perfect illustration of why, at least, the Pentagon would object to moving the division because they were very concerned they would lose it. If they couldn't find a home for it, they would lose it.

Q: What was the concern of the State Department that you absorbed with the loss of South Korea? Say South Korea went, what would that mean to us?

STERN: The theory is that South Korea is pivotal to the defense of Japan, which is pivotal to the defense of the United States. It is a house of cards; if one falls, all of them fall. We have heard the same thesis for other geographic areas.

BENNETT: Further south [South Vietnam].

STERN: Further south. It's not always clear to me that this is a good illustration or a sound theory, but that has always been, and continues to be the American perception of the Northeast Asia triangle. South Korea is the pivotal aspect to that because the Japanese only have a very limited military capacity, particularly on the ground, and are therefore not able to defend themselves with what they have. Everybody has to rely on the South Koreans.

BENNETT: Let me pick up on that, because I think the evolution of my own thought process on that was that obviously that the domino theory was not a very persuasive argument. It seems to me that, clearly, there is a much more persuasive argument. You have, I think, to think of this as a stable area now. That is, it's like a very strong position on a chess board, where the two sides are facing each other from equally strong positions. And, in a sense, as long as those positions remain, it is stable because nobody can gain anything by attacking. I think that's what we would have lost had we begun changing the power relationships in the area. In particular you're looking at an evolution in China. There were some things happening in Russia that we didn't understand at the time, but which obviously have gone on all the way to where we are today. Japan itself; I think people felt that if, for example, the two Koreas were reunited under the North, that this would have profound political effects on Japan, which would feel threatened, and would react. I found that very persuasive. It's not so much that overt military action in the area would lead to a blowup of the world, although that was always possible too. If you got a military action, go back to World War I, one thing led to another, and to another, and to another, and pretty soon you could have a world war where we're throwing nuclear missiles at each other. That's not a risk that is totally to be discounted under those circumstances.

Q: Was this part of the thinking, not only the way you thought about it, but that the embassy and the people that you talked with in the Department of State... Was this the matrix in which we were working?

BENNETT: I probably would not have talked to people in the Department on these issues, but I sort of absorbed it out of being in the embassy, and listening to Sneider and others talk on the subject, and then adding my own ideas. But, I think this was part also of the evolution, or emergence of a kind of consensus that at the time...

STERN: As you know, all foreign affairs institutions in this world operate on the old simple theory: "If it works, don't fix it." And in Korea you had the stability that John refers to, and nobody was interested in doing anything to rock the boat because nobody could be quite sure of the outcome. So, if you're in that situation, you stick with what you've got, and rock the boat to the minimum.

BENNETT: I would have put it a little stronger than that. I would have said rocking the boat was very likely to screw things up, and the gains from rocking the boat seemed at the time to be very small.

STERN: This is where I would somewhat disagree with John, because it was never quite clear to me that either of the North Korean allies would permit Pyongyang to go very far, even if the 2nd Division had been withdrawn. The North-South Korea issue must be viewed in the context of the global situation, as John suggested. Whether Kim Il Sung wanted to invade South Korea had nothing to do with whether he would have gotten away with it. It had to do much more with U.S.-PRC rapprochement, and the U.S.-USSR relationship at that time. Kim Il Sung, as well as the South Koreans, were, and in part still are today, a pawn in the Big Power relationships. Had I been Carter, and wished to pursue the 2nd Division issue, the first place I would have gone was Peking, and the second place I would have gone to was Moscow. I would not have raised the question openly in a debate in the United States. The fact of the matter is that neither of those two actions was taken, which suggested to me at the time that it was not an entirely serious proposition on Carter's part.

Q: I'd like to go to a rather famous incident that happened at the time. All of us were there; we called it "the tree-chopping incident." It was in the de-militarized zone, and I think had an effect on everybody's thinking. Tom, could you describe what actually happened.

STERN: This is etched in my memory forever. As, I mentioned earlier, I arrived on July 1, 1976, brand-new, having known relatively little about Korea. I was introduced to the Koreans on July 4, in that usual mass-gathering on the ambassador's lawn. It was also the bicentennial, so it was even larger than usual, and I had to remember all the Kim, Parks and Lees around in a very brief time. A week later, the ambassador left for his annual vacation; this is Dick Sneider, and his last words to me as he got on the plane were: "Don't worry Tom, nothing happens here in the summertime. Just relax and take it easy." A few weeks later, August 17th, two of our officers were brutally attacked and killed in the DMZ. Now, to describe the DMZ. The DMZ is an area that separates the North and South Korean forces, averaging a mile in width, some places very narrow and quite wide in some other places. When you get toward the east coast the separation is considerably broader than two kilometers because of the mountain ranges. The joint security area, which is a part of the DMZ, is a small area in which the few and far between dialogues between the signers of the armistice take place. In 1977, this area was patrolled by both U.S. and North Korean troops, which gave rise to periodic confrontations. The area consists of a watchtower - I'm now describing the south side of the joint security area - a couple of other small buildings, and half of three buildings which were used by the conferees for their periodical meetings. On the other side was the other half of those three buildings, plus a large facade of an alleged office building which we were quite certain, however, was only a facade and had nothing behind the front. There were also two watchtowers on the north side, from which the North Koreans took pictures of every American going into the joint security area, so that I'm sure all of our pictures are on file in Pyongyang. Whether they can retrieve them or not is a different story. The famous tree lay on the south side of the joint security area, approximately 200 yards from what was called "the bridge of no return," which had been used during the Korean War for exchange of prisoners. We wanted to prune the tree. The North Koreans insisted that this was a holy tree. That is, it was sacred in their minds, and therefore they were unwilling to have it touched at all. Our insistence was that we could prune it because the tree had grown so big it was obscuring our guards' vision of North Korea and the bridge.

BENNETT: Also, we had a tower down by the bridge which we had put men in, and we couldn't see them from further back. Wasn't that it? Our view of those guys up by the bridge was obscured.

STERN: That may be true, because there were some other buildings, some observation towers in that area. In any case, one Sunday morning a small detail of American troops, headed by a captain and a lieutenant, decided, after having negotiated, or attempted to negotiate with the North, the right to prune that tree - they finally decided that was not going to be agreed to, and decided to take it upon themselves to go ahead and prune the tree.

Q: This was not conveyed to the embassy at all. This was housekeeping matter.

STERN: We knew nothing about it. It is still unclear today how far up in the chain of command that action had been approved. It was certainly not an issue of a nature which prevented the commanding general at that time, Dick Stilwell, from leaving the country for a well-earned rest in Japan. So, what you had in the American presence in Korea was a three-star air force officer who had been the deputy and a green, untried, untested DCM, who certainly knew nothing about tree-pruning and only a little more about Korea. As I recall the story, the American detail went ahead and started pruning the tree and were fallen upon by a squad of North Korean troops carrying bats and axes. In the meli;½e the two officers were brutally beaten and finally died. For some reason or other, the alarm was not given so that the reinforcement troops did not arrive until much later, by which time the North Koreans had pretty well taken off and gone back to their side of the DMZ. Immediately, of course, a major uproar was raised because obviously this is not the way we'd like the world to behave. Cable traffic increased by leaps and bounds, and all of them NIACT - "night action, top-priority, wake everybody up, don't let anybody rest, we've got to get an answer to this." The first messages, of course, were in the military channels. It was a couple, if not several hours later that the embassy found out what in fact had happened. The commanding general was called back from Tokyo; no action was taken to bring back our ambassador, at least until the situation had become a little clearer. We were faced with a very difficult issue; namely, was this a provoked attack which had been ordered by higher authorities, or was this just the act of a sergeant who was in charge of the North Korean detail who had been so attached to that tree, and felt so strongly about it that he decided to murder a couple of Americans in order to defend it. In a society like North Korea which, as John pointed out before, was completely closed, the answer to that question was not easily available, and that is somewhat akin to some situations we have today. Motivation and direction is not always easy to discern. The interesting part of the episode, to me at least, was the tight control that the Pentagon and [Secretary of State] Henry Kissinger had on the situation. They immediately put monitors in the DMZ overlooking this particular area and the picture was then relayed back to Washington so that Washington could move the troops as it wished with the American general in Seoul essentially being only an intermediary to pass whatever orders he had from Washington to the commander out in the field.

Q: Was this done within hours?

STERN: Within hours. The communication system was something fantastic. It was immediate, and live, and in real time. But the interesting aspect of this, and the one that really grated on General Stilwell's soul, and I'm sure it would grate on any general's soul, was that he became a messenger boy. In fact, Washington had as complete a picture of the scenario as he had. They had maps of the area, they knew exactly the distances and where our troops were, and they knew where the South Koreans and the North Koreans were. Washington was able, when the time finally came to complete the pruning of that tree, to move our troops as well as General Stilwell could. They had just as much information.

Q: When you say "Washington," who is "Washington?"

STERN: This was the Joint-Chiefs of Staff, it was in the War Room of the Joint-Chiefs, and they had a 24 hour watch on duty, headed of course by a senior officer. When the time came to move the troops, I'm sure all the chiefs were there. Kissinger, who was not, as far as I know, in the Pentagon War Room, was in the White House War Room...

Q: He was at that point Secretary of State.

STERN: The other memory I have of this incident was also of concern to some in Washington. I got a very nasty note, also NIACT [Night Action telegram] from Phil Habib asking me whether I'd seen the President. My answer was no. General Stilwell went to see him and I felt that this was essentially a military issue, and therefore I did not go along, although General Stilwell did invite me to go with him. This is the other, I think, mystifying part of this whole story. Where, in a situation like Korea, does the political arm end and where does the military arm begin? I have never been a great proponent of civilian generals, as I've never been a proponent of military ambassadors. But to draw the line becomes a very fine and delicate point. And I, perhaps, drew the line incorrectly. I perhaps should have accepted Stilwell's invitation, and should have gone to see President Park. But my decision had been that the situation had turned to be essentially a military one and one therefore that General Stilwell ought to handle. It perhaps should not be confused by the presence of the American Charge'. That obviously wasn't Kissinger's view because he would have wanted me to be present on the front lines, if we had front lines at that time. Nowhere, that I know of, in the training of DCMs, was there anything that would have taught me how to react in a situation of that kind. Perhaps had I been in Vietnam I would have had a better understanding of that kind of situation. But nowhere in my experience or training was I able to pick up anything that would have given me some guidance on whether I should have gone to see the President with General Stilwell or not.

Q: Would it have made any difference?

STERN: It would not have made any difference, because the issue was so controlled by Washington. It might have made a difference, I guess. It did not make a difference.

Q: What actually was happening between Stilwell and Park Chung Hee, the President?

STERN: Nothing, I think, because Stilwell was in no better position than I was in telling him what Washington was thinking about. I guess General Stilwell just briefed him on what had happened in the DMZ. Remember, all the troops in the DMZ were under Stilwell's control, even the Korean troops that were there. I guess he just briefed him, and then Park probably asked "What are you going to do next?" and Stilwell probably said "I'm waiting for orders, Sir."

BENNETT: This is just between Tom and me, but I would, if I had been in Tom's position, have had to go with Stilwell. The rivalry between Sneider and Stilwell was so powerful that you had to continue to exert the authority of the embassy.

Q: In other words, Stilwell was quite willing to take over the full American role, and Sneider was... these were two very powerful characters.

STERN: That's right. Of course, I didn't know that much about it.

BENNETT: You were too new on the scene.

STERN: That's right, I was too new on the scene. I had heard something about the rivalry, but I didn't know how intense it was. I learned that a while later. But I was impressed by the fact that Stilwell asked me if I wanted to go. That suggested to me that, if there were a rivalry, at least it had not been applied to me yet and I could have some confidence in his telling me afterwards what went on. In fact, as I recall, very little went on, so it didn't make a difference.

Q: After that, what happened? I recall that I was told at a country team meeting that we were going to cut down the tree, and I think the thought in everybody's mind was: "I hope the hell the chainsaws work, and take along a couple of them."

STERN: That was finally done. After going through all the options, which could have ranged from bombarding Pyongyang to doing nothing, the decision was finally made that we would reassert our rights to cut that tree down, and we sent in a sizeable squad of American troops and a couple of chainsaws. Sure enough, the tree was pruned. Not cut down, pruned. The tree is still there for all to see.

Q: Did the embassy have any input to this decision?

STERN: None whatsoever. Embassy input in this whole episode was minimal. The embassy was headed by a green DCM. The State Department was run by a very strong Secretary of State. We were never asked for our opinions. We kept submitting reports, of course, of what was going on in the streets, and what we could find out in the military. In fact, Paul Cleveland, who is now ambassador to New Zealand, was sent out to sit in with Stilwell in the War Room at his headquarters. And I went over there periodically myself. But, it was a one-way street. We reported whatever we could pick up, sent it back, usually as an urgent NIACT message. But not once, except for that message that Habib sent on my inaction, did we ever hear from Washington.

Q: But, to put it into context, we did have Philip Habib, who had been ambassador to South Korea shortly beforehand, who was in Washington.

STERN: He was the under secretary at that time.

Q: So this meant that there was some Korean expertise at the otheend.

BENNETT: That was a real problem right there. The fact that you had a former ambassador to Korea sitting in the Under Secretary's job in Washington, actually tended to pull all the power, all the decision-making into the center again, and you don't necessarily want that, because ex-officials may not be current.

STERN: And secondly, as far as I know, Dick Sneider, who as I said was on home leave, was not called back to Washington to assist with this. If there were any conversations, they were by telephone from Washington to Vermont. So, Habib did not use whatever most recent knowledge of Korea there was, even though he had it available.

BENNETT: We are getting close, here, to the relationship between those two people. Between Sneider and Habib. That happens to be fairly negative.

Q: I want to come back to that, but could we pursue the tree business just a little bit farther. How concerned were we at the embassy and within the military that this might precipitate a war?

BENNETT: We flew in the B-52s. STERN: I think there were B-52s and we brought the navy, the Sixth Fleet carriers off the shore. But that doesn't tell you. There was no hysteria. I don't think there was anybody in either the embassy or the military who foresaw this as beginning a World War III. John can comment on this more deeply than I can because I was so engrossed in my own problems I don't know what the rest of the embassy was thinking, but I didn't feel there was any great concern. People weren't packing up and going home.

BENNETT: Well, I will tell you that I happened to be at Mount Sorak on holiday and after four days I got word that the embassy had phoned me.

Q: Sorak being a mountain resort on the east coast.

BENNETT: Yes, about four or five hours from Seoul by car. I got word that they had phoned, and at this point I was going back, so I figured I'd just wait until I got back to find out what had happened. I had no idea what had happened, obviously. The immediate effect was that they tried to get hold of me because I would be useful. Then, as events played out, they had no more interest in getting me. So I continued to go fishing. I think that's probably a fair description.

Q: Looking back on it now, I knew we were going in to cut down the tree, and I was taking my daughter to the airport. I had just arrived, I think a day or two before you did, Tom, so I was brand new. So, I took my daughter to the airport. I knew we were going to go in and cut the tree down, but there was no panic at the airport. I mean, she got on the plane, and had people been concerned, I would have remembered mobs around the airport in Da Nang during the fall of Vietnam or something like that. But that was not the case.

STERN: No, and you raise an interesting question on whether we were much too relaxed about this. One of the reasons I did not feel any sense of panic or urgency was that we did not see any signs on the North Korean side of any mobilization. The military activity was primarily on our part. The intelligence collection capability on North Korea was relatively limited. Nevertheless, we could have detected some movements had that been taking place. And they were not taking place, so that I don't think anybody - either the command or in the embassy - felt very threatened at that point in time.

Q: Playing this out then, we move past the tree incident, the Carter administration has come in. Do you think the tree incident had any impact on the campaign or realizing what a dangerous situation it was, or did this take place in isolation.

BENNETT: I have no idea.

Q: Moving on, why don't we finish up the troop withdrawal business? Carter comes in, Cyrus Vance is Secretary of State, Richard Holbrooke is Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, promises have been made to withdraw troops.

BENNETT: Habib was still there, incidentally.

Q: Habib was still there. Where was he?

BENNETT: He was still the Under Secretary.

Q: How did this play out, as far as the troop withdrawal? Were people coming out from Washington to look over the scene and see whether this made sense, and talking about it?

BENNETT: Abramowitz came out because he was ISA at that point. IS is the Office of International Security Affairs in the Pentagon.

STERN: If there were any trips, most of them were on the military side.

BENNETT: Brzezinski came out, I remember that. At this point we now get into the Force Improvement Program and all that entailed. If you're going to take the troops out, you have to build up the Korean military, make them feel more self-confident. So, we went down that route. I remember I was engaged in a long exercise - it took months - providing the economic justification for raising the level of military assistance.

Q: On the idea that this was going to be a balance to the troop withdrawal?

BENNETT: Yes, that was an element in it.

Q: Were you explaining this to the Koreans as you went along?

BENNETT: Oh, sure.

Q: How was this received?

BENNETT: With great skepticism. It didn't assuage their feelings bit.

Q: The people you were talking with, John, as economic officer, where were they?

BENNETT: Well, I would talk to the Economic Planning Board (EPB) people, Kim Jae Ik, who was then the Director General of Planning. I would talk to some people in the Blue House like Oh Won Chol who was one of our favorite buddies. The Minister of Trade. Occasionally I would accompany somebody on the military side, and we would go talk to somebody in the Korean military, but most of it, in fact, other than providing a kind of rationale which would be useful to Washington, most of the negotiations on this thing were done by General Street and his people with the Korean military.

Q: Street was who? STERN: General Street was the chief of the Military Assistance Group.

BENNETT: Before we go on, let me just finish this off. This was one of those macro-economic exercises in which you can justify a given level of assistance based on their requirements for foreign exchange and for funds within the Korean economy. It is a very crude kind of exercise, but what it did ultimately was justify a certain level of funds that then went on for five years, not because it was economically justified any longer, but because it was politically justified, given what we wanted out of the Korean side.

STERN: That's correct. The Force Improvement Program was essentially a wish list that the Koreans had been asked to put together.

BENNETT: We also imposed some things on them.

STERN: Which, as John said, didn't make any economic sense, and I'm not sure they made any military sense either because such things as submarines were included in Korean assistance.

BENNETT: Was the ROK tank in there at that point, I don't remember?

STERN: No, that was a little bit later.

BENNETT: Indigenous tanks. Republic of Korea indigenous tanks. That was our concession to a request for rockets, Korean rockets.

Q: In other words, no rockets, but you can make your own tank.

STERN: Right, and that has a history all of its own. I used to discuss the FIP frequently with General Johnny Sohn, who at that time was in charge of putting the FIP together. As everything else in Korea it goes by five years. So, it's the First Force Improvement Plan, the Second Force Improvement Plan and so on. What General Sohn did was ask each of the three services what they would like to have in the way of military armaments and they, following the American practice, gave him everything they could think of, and he put it all together. There was a massive request, which we could obviously not afford to provide.

BENNETT: We sent it back and said put priorities on this stuff, and they did, then we put priorities on the stuff, and we argued about which priorities should apply.

An interesting side light on this discussion was that I was approached by Kim Jae Ik from the Economic Planning Board about the FIP. He was concerned about the amount of money going into it on the Korean side and hoped we would keep it under control. I assured him we were trying to do our best, but the embassy was outweighed by our military and the Korean military working together. I offered him little hope in fact. His response over the next year was to put an EPB budget analyst in the Ministry of Defense, telling the military that he was their man, their advocate at the EPB. The ploy worked in part and was another tribute in my mind to the pervasive influence of Kim.

STERN: Then we decided to give them whatever we had available in the first place. It was a long, drawn-out process which, at the end, I guess, was helpful.

BENNETT: Sure. One of the things it did was change the subject. We weren't talking about taking the troops out, we were talking about strengthening Korea's military. We spent a couple of years arguing about this thing.

Q: We were talking about the troop withdrawal issue.

STERN: Just very briefly, the issue hung in the balance until Carter agreed to visit Korea in June of 1979. At that time he had not finally made a decision, and we in the embassy were quite hopeful that we might be able to get him to reverse it. So, first of all when he came, he got lengthy briefings, all of which were directed at the question of why the troops should not be withdrawn. After running around the track with the troops and visiting with them, running around the Secret Gardens [in Seoul] with his wife, (he was jogging), Carter finally went to see President Park and listened to the President's plea. He also went around to see other senior officials, all of whom gave him the same pitch - namely, "You cannot withdraw troops."

In returning from his call on the President to the ambassador's residence where he was staying (at that time the ambassador was William Gleysteen), they came up to the residence and Ambassador Gleysteen asked that the President not get out, but continue the conversation about troop withdrawal. The people in the car were the President, the ambassador, and Brzezinski. Here there were the three of them with the Korean driver in the front discussing heatedly what to do about troop withdrawal. The vote was, obviously, two against one.

Q: This was Gleysteen and Brzezinski against troop withdrawal, with the President being in favor?

STERN: Yes. And minutes went by and nobody was leaving the car. I'm sure everybody was getting very nervous, all the attendants who were standing outside chewing their fingernails, wondering when to open the door so the President could get out, standing there minutes on end. They finally came up with a compromise, part of which is classified, part of which reflects a demand that the Koreans increase their expenditures on defense up to 6% of GNP, which was the U.S. level. They were somewhat below that at that time. Not much, but somewhat. In exchange for these considerations, the President would then suspend any further consideration on troop withdrawal. And that's the way the car meeting came out. That was the final outcome after years of debating troop withdrawal; it was all decided within 15-20 minutes in the back seat of a limousine, with a Korean driver.

Q: I'd like to turn now to the issue of human rights, and also the operating style of Ambassador Richard Sneider, who was an East Asian expert and a man of very strong ideas, who also, I gather, had his difficulties with both the commanding general Stilwell and Philip Habib, the Under Secretary. Could you address this? Let's talk about human rights, and weave the ambassador in if we can.

BENNETT: Well, the issue was there when I got to Korea in 1975. It was kind of a background issue at all times. Kim Dae Jung was in jail; Kim Chi Ha, the Catholic poet was in jail; there were a number of people who were picked up in this period for political demonstrations, or worse, who were tried. The trials went on for weeks. They were somewhat inflammatory; the American press covered them at considerable length. It was the sort of issue on which no American could really defend the Koreans simply because these are the sort of things we accept as fundamental. We are not basically talking about torture, although accusations of that keep coming up from one time to another, but really political rights issues the Koreans were not going to move on and we were not going to give the other way. This intensifies the pressure on the troop withdrawal issue because it makes the American public less sympathetic to keeping troops there for what is essentially an authoritarian, and maybe a bad authoritarian government. It never really came to a head at this point. Kim Dae Jung had earlier fled the country under threats to his life, and again in 1980 he was in trouble for his life and I think our intervention had something to do with saving him; but there was no issue on which we could intervene at this point that would have been particularly helpful. Nevertheless, you had people back here in Washington who wanted us to do various things publicly. We did, for example, cover the trials pretty extensively. We kept a count of how many people we presumably considered as political prisoners. We constantly got letters about the state of Kim Dae Jung's health, so someone had to go and check this out. There was a sort of daily report, and it becomes an issue between us and the Koreans. A problem in dealing with the Korean government and getting information. I used to hear about it because I would talk to my Korean economic colleagues and they'd say "What the hell are you beating up on us about these human rights issues?" I would tell them "It's very simple, we believe in this stuff." They would get it off their chest and I would get the chance to assert my own views on the subject.

The ambassador was in something of a dilemma through all of this. Troop withdrawal issues and some other issues that we faced were, I think, higher priorities in his mind. What this did was complicate his negotiations. In the embassy itself there were some people who had fairly strong human rights views, and felt that the embassy ought to be writing more inflammatory reporting on the subject.

Q: Who especially was that?

BENNETT: John LaMazza, the labor officer.

STERN: The labor officer having been charged with responsibility for monitoring human rights.

BENNETT: These guys, they get the responsibility and then they get an ambassador who really doesn't want them doing this stuff because all it did was evoke more messages from Washington, and make him go and issue demarches to the Foreign Secretary on human rights problems. He had to go down and try to get a response out of them. The consequence was that Sneider really found these guys epitomized his human rights problem, and he wouldn't talk to them.

Q: You mean the embassy officers?

BENNETT: They were non-people as far as he was concerned. They didn't exist.

This situation always made me very uncomfortable. It was a close embassy - we all worked together quite well, I thought, and we shared common goals and in varying degrees a sense of being at risk. At the same time, I had great admiration from Sneider, but there was nothing one could say or do once Sneider had made up his mind about someone."

Q: How about you, Tom?

STERN: It is a very difficult issue. We may well stand for human rights; we understand why we're interested in human rights. But to translate that into Korean terms, and make it meaningful to Koreans, at least at that time, was an almost impossible job. The answer was always, "Yes, that sounds very good, but don't forget 30 miles from here we have 600,000 troops ready to invade us, and if we ease up down here, they'll be right at our doorsteps the next minute."

It's the kind of dialogue where the two sides do not meet in the dark, they just pass each other. It was never very satisfactory. At least, I never found my conversations very satisfactory, and I tended to, sometimes at least, make them rather "pro forma." There was no understanding on the Korean side of the pluses and minuses of human rights, or on our part, their concern for their security.

Q: How did our embassy respond when the Carter administration came in? Pat Derian, as I recall from sitting in country team meetings, had almost everything cleared through the Human Rights Bureau and you had an ambassador who had no real sympathy for this as being a major element.

BENNETT: I wouldn't say that. I was completely sympathetic. There are only certain things you can get done with a government in a given time. We had enough on our plate already, and we kept getting little add-ons like Tong Sun Park. That's point one. What can you do in the human rights area? We took 100 years to get legal equality for blacks in the United States, and we expect the Koreans to put out full-fledged democratic forms of government overnight. It doesn't happen that way. There have to be institutional and mental changes, cultural changes that are consistent with it before you really get a policy that means anything. That just was totally at odds with what Washington wanted us to do. One of the things I used to find interesting, and I felt over the long run useful to talk with Koreans about, was what did they want in a national assembly? What kind of government, after Park, does it make sense to have in Korea? We got some fairly interesting answers. I finally concluded, for example, that in my own mind, some sort of parliamentary system made more sense than a centralized, authoritarian system, that it would solve some problems which the existing system really created. This was actually a subject of discussion in the current proposals for constitutional change.

Q: Now we're talking about 1987.

BENNETT: This was not a quick process.

STERN: I'd like to make a couple of quick points. Number one, I want to reemphasize what John said about Sneider's view on human rights. He was certainly a proponent of human rights. But there are other issues involved when you're talking to a foreign culture.

Secondly, my clientele was primarily the Korean military. Now there was a group to whom the phrase "human rights" meant absolutely nothing. It was like talking to the wall. My conversations with them were, as I suggested before, like two ships passing in the night. There was just no common ground on which to have a discussion.

Q: What was the relationship between the embassy and the human rights advocates who were pushing this in the Carter administration, I'm thinking in particular of Pat Derian, but how about the Secretary of State?

STERN: I'm not quite sure. We paid a lot of lip service to human rights, but when it came time for day to day activities, seldom was it a concern. An embassy like Seoul has so many things on its plate day in and day out that human rights becomes part of a large show and is mentioned most often just in passing. We used to get messages periodically from the State Department, Pat Derian's office, and we would wave the flag and that was the end of it. There was very little connection between human rights and our policy vis a vis Korea.

BENNETT: Tong Sun Park was a part of our problem at the time and had to be dealt with, despite the importance of other issues. Park was pretty clearly bribing American Congressmen, very likely with Korean government support. Otto Passman, the Congressman from Louisiana, was one of the bribees. I got to be his control officer on one occasion. I met him at the airport and whisked him through the formalities, after which he was picked up by Park and taken to his hotel. I took the baggage, got to ask him what else he needed, gave him his local currency although it was clear to everyone that all of his expenses were picked up by Park, and was told to go away. Subsequently we got his purchases and gifts delivered to the embassy for pouch shipment to Washington. One of the gifts was a silver turtle boat in a glass case that must have weighed a ton and been worth a fortune - sent in the name of the director of the KCIA. Phil Habib once told me that he hated Passman and the corruption, but there was little the embassy could do - although if anyone could have found a way to retaliate, Phil would have.

The Park problem was obviously extremely delicate. We were trying to get the Koreans to extradite Park to testify and they were being reluctant. I knew Park's brother, Ken, quite well - he ran a big shipping company. On one occasion, he told me something about his brother. I ran into Sneider leaving the embassy at 6 in the evening and casually mentioned what Ken had told me. Sneider's face went beet red and he asked why I hadn't called him immediately - I responded I didn't think he would be interested, just amused. I was wrong on both counts. He wheeled around, as what I had said gave him the impression that there might be a way to get Park to testify and solve our problem. He went back to his office to fire off a cable. I had let him down. But that was one of the costs of Sneider's reluctance to share many subjects with his staff - a conflict between security and the need for the staff to know. Still, I think he did quite well in sharing and keeping the senior staff current - many of the subjects were very sensitive and not everyone in the embassy was known to be discreet.

Q: This brings me to something else that you might want to comment on. We were talking at one point where you said that there wasn't any sustained policy. As far as you are concerned, you were always jumping from one problem to another. There always seemed to be a crisis at the embassy.

BENNETT: The troop issue was the leit motif in this period. That one went all the way through the period. That was I think the most important issue. There were other issues that came up at you, and then there were some we actually began to worry about, the whole set of questions about how do you make a relationship with the North more stable, less uncertain, less dangerous. Another one which we started to work on during this period was trying to begin the process of liberalizing, of market-opening in Korea, and removing the protectionist measures. This was something Sneider felt very strongly had to begin then because it would take a long time. It's twelve years later now, and he was right. We've still got a long way to go. But, if you didn't begin then, you would have had a much more difficult, and a more confrontational situation.

Q: You're talking about market-opening to make the market in Korea more receptive to American goods, so you wouldn't have a Japanese situation?

BENNETT: Exactly. There were lots of issues of this sort that we wanted to begin to work on with the Koreans, and we did. But, in a sense I think Sneider was very good because he anticipated problems, and we didn't always succeed in doing very much, but we laid a base for later people.

STERN: I also want to stress that point. Sneider was very good. He looked at the situation in much longer terms than I think either Washington or any of perhaps us did. For example, we spent a long time developing a message concerning the need for institution-building in Korea.

BENNETT: That goes with democratic rights, too.

STERN: Building a base so that political development could take place. But the fact of the matter is that each of us in the embassy had a small piece of the total pie. We were concerned with that piece, we worked with that piece, we spent innumerable hours on that piece, and it was very difficult to see whether that piece had any relationship to anybody else's piece. Only secondly we worried about things that went across the board. That was true even in a small institution such as the embassy in Seoul, large though it may have been, it was nevertheless a small institution. Issues that cut across various segments of the embassy were very difficult to handle. We had staff meetings, country team meetings and yet some people felt left out. The fact was that there was nothing to be left out from. There wasn't that much more going on in the political section that the economic section did not know, or in the economic section that the consular section did not know. People just thought there was a lot more going on than there really was.

When an issue of the kind we were talking about, that is, one that cut across the board like institution-building, then I think a lot of the junior officers got involved, a lot of people who may never have been involved in issues of this kind got involved. But those were rare occasions. Most of the time you stick to your knitting and you worry about what you are supposed to do, and that's all you've got time for.

BENNETT: You've got a trade show opening tomorrow. You've got to get certain work done. You've got a report due two days from now, you worry about getting it done. You got an instruction to go talk to somebody about something [like the U.S. position at some international meeting], you've got to get the appointment and go do it. That sort of thing.

STERN: The text book answer to the question is that that's why you've got a DCM and an ambassador. To hell with that. The DCM has things to do; the ambassador has things to do. He also has meetings tomorrow, and meetings the next day, he's got to get ready for this and that. Time to think in an embassy is a rare commodity.

BENNETT: And one more thing. I was thinking about this in the human rights issues. We did have problems with certain constituents, Americans in the community, Ed Poitras, for example, and so on. Those people had to be talked to, listened to, met with, reasoned with, from one time to another.

STERN: And don't forget the Cardinal. He also had to be listened and reasoned with.

BENNETT: Religious and private sector human rights groups were frequently on the embassy's back. We all tried to be as responsive as we could, but we knew there was a limit in what we could get the Korean government to do. Sneider met with these groups whenever there was a suitable occasion and invited them on occasions like July 4 to his residence and made sure that visitors from Washington saw them. To some degree, we felt we were being manipulated by these groups, constantly put in the wrong. On the other hand, had I been in their position, I suppose I would have done the same things. In any case, we simply rode along with the flow and tried to be as responsive as we could.

One major difference I had with these groups is that I wanted to change the whole climate for human rights. It was all very well to intervene and save Kim Dae Jung's life as we did on several occasions - but once he was saved, had anything more fundamental changed?

[Tom Stern has left.]

Q: John Bennett and I are going to talk about two topics. One is the relationship of the ambassador and the commanding general of the American troops. I wonder, could you explain how the command structure, not the whole fancy command structure, but how did the American military command work?

BENNETT: You had General Stilwell, who was the senior military man in the country. He was also commander of U.S. forces in Korea, he was the joint-commander over the joint forces, and he also had the UN command. He also is a very energetic personality, with considerable self-image. And he did not sleep, so he kept everybody working.

Q: He was an army officer?

BENNETT: Yes. On the other hand, Sneider had the President's blessing to be the senior American in the theater, and for a full set of things the military had to report to him. That is an uneasy relationship because the military is an enormous bureaucracy, and the U.S. embassy can't keep up with all the things that it's involved in, yet there are constant points of friction - with smuggling out of the PX system, with the status of forces agreement, how Americans are to be treated, what their rights are on a wide range of things. So this is constantly generating little issues, traffic accidents, etc. and the military wants to handle them its own way. It has its own set of interests in how they're handled, and they went crossways with the American embassy. What it used to get down to is that these two guys used to periodically find ways to humiliate the other. They were quite brutal about doing it.

Q: Can you give an example?

BENNETT: I can't. I can't think of one. For example, Tom mentioned that Stilwell invited him to go when he went to visit the President. Well now, normally that invitation should have come through the embassy to Stilwell. I don't know how it came, but it should have come through the embassy to Stilwell. And, if I had been the chargé d'affaires, I would have gone; I would have taken the American commander with me when I go call on the President. Stilwell was the sort of guy who would consciously come last to a meeting, walk in 10 minutes late.

Q: I recall this. I never realized that at country team meetings; now that you say this I realize he always came late.

BENNETT: Yes. It is a kind of one-upmanship and it used to drive the ambassador wild, and he started playing right back. I wish I could think of more examples.

Q: Did this affect the operations?

BENNETT: It affects the staff, because the staff has a harder time communicating, and it makes your relationship with your military colleagues in the other bureaucracy more difficult because you have to worry about protecting your boss. They have to worry about protecting their boss.

Q: Everything there, the embassy staff and the military staff are connected at every level. I know as the consul general, everything dealing with consular affairs had a military component. I mean everything.

Moving to another side, there were Americans there. You had to deal with two communities, one was the business community with the American Chamber of Commerce and all and their interest. The other one, going back to the beginning of the century has had a disproportionate political impact, the American missionaries and the Church movement. Could you comment on these.

BENNETT: I think the businessmen in Korea are, by and large, crybabies. They are always complaining, and they always think the embassy doesn't do enough. Now, to some measure I think the embassy's problem has got to be, this sounds manipulative, but you have to give them time. Sneider I think was very successful at that. He met regularly with them, he invited them to functions where appropriate. They felt that they could go to the ambassador and get help. A lot of this was form, not substance, but the form is important. My own view of the American business community is that they are crybabies in that they expected to get much better treatment than they did. They expected that we would use our security commitment to enforce their interests, their economics interest in Korea, and that of course is not the case. We were not about to do that.

Q: Did you find that from an operating standpoint, to try to get Americans to get a market in Korea, did you find yourself, as economic counselor, inhibited by our policy that we will not select American companies to sponsor, that we have to give everybody equal treatment, as opposed to the French and the British, where they put their prestige behind one firm or another and push much harder for one firm?

BENNETT: I didn't find that. Perhaps the relationship was a little easier in Korea in that the U.S. was so large an influence, that oftentimes it was going to be an American firm that got it. The only question was which American company. I didn't find that. As a matter of fact, I don't really want the deals made on the basis that it's either British or French or somebody else, I'd really like the American offer to be the best one, however they evaluate it.

One of the issues was how do we play the nuclear units, and by and large by the end, for example, it would only be Westinghouse still in the running.

Q: We're talking about nuclear power?

BENNETT: Right. So, by the end we didn't have any problem supporting them in their proposals. The Koreans understood this whole process pretty well, and were able to get good offers out of the American side, so I think it worked out pretty well.

Q: Turning to the missionaries, how did you see their role?

BENNETT: They obviously were a font of knowledge about Korea. They were also, I think, an important listening post for the American side to hear what political opposition in Korea was talking about, what their concerns were, and what they were thinking. There were some problems with that because the missionary side has a range of views, from fairly conservative to fairly liberal. Many of them came, at some point, to regard the embassy as the enemy, which was kind of a mirror image of what the business community had thought of the American embassy at various times. And that was too bad, because I think their expectation was that we would use our full power in order to impose democratic forms on the Koreans. It was a lack of real understanding about how all this comes about.

I continue to keep a relationship with one of the missionary family members, Horace Underwood, who was at Yonsei University, and it seems to me his views have become more conservative in recent years, and his expectations have gotten more reasonable. He's also very helpful in keeping me informed when I go out to Korea about what's happening in the opposition and the evolution of views. I still think of Korea as a very conservative society. That's one of the things that I think the more radical missionary group simply didn't perceive.

Q: Where did the more radical missionary group come from?

BENNETT: I don't know that there's any easy common denominator. Some were Catholic, some were Presbyterian..

Q: I suppose the fundamentalists were off to one side.

BENNETT: Well, most of those are pretty conservative. It's not easy, but there again it's something the American embassy has to deal with. It's one of those things that take time and a good deal of tender loving care.

Q: Could the relationship have been improved?

BENNETT: I don't think the relationship would have gotten much better in the time we were there because events were running against us. The human rights issues with the government were there. I suppose the Pat Derians of the world made our lives a little more difficult, but then the fact that these people felt they had an ally in Washington, between their activities there and Pat Derian's activities back here, they thought they ought to be able to force the embassy to do some of the things they wanted done.

Q: There is another element here, and that is the American press, which all seems to gravitate towards the missionaries to find what's happening in Korea. Did you find that?

BENNETT: The press is always looking for the down side of the story. I say always - almost always - and they could always go to the missionaries and get a good story. They could go to the American businessman and get a good story. They could always find somebody who was poorly paid, whose life was kind of a mess, and to whom life hadn't been very nice. Those stories are anecdotal, but these are the evidence on which people make up their minds and form their attitudes. I used to feel at the time that the press was very unfair to the Koreans. As I've gotten further along I think either they've changed or I've changed. But if you look now, most of my problem with them is that they tend to give you a zero-sum story. For every compliment they will pay a criticism. Everything is balanced by a negative. That's probably true in life in a sense, but the stories also bother me oftentimes.

I realized from Vietnam that trying to influence the press was a risky business. We did spend a lot of time on correspondents and I think USIS did a good in facilitating their access and getting them to hear other sides of a story. I worked closely with Clyde Hess, the USIS director and over the three years there, I think we did better - but perhaps this was the result of a very successful economy.

Q: Also, in Korea, at least when we were there, there were no resident correspondents. They would come over from Japan, which also tends to...it takes a person living in a place to get a feel for it.

BENNETT: There is another part to this too, which is that Japanese attitudes towards Korea were pretty negative. One of my most appalling realizations was that it is perfectly respectable in Japan to believe that the South attacked the North in 1950. Lots of Japanese believe that. It's almost a racial prejudice. The Japanese regard the Koreans as the mafia of Japan. They're the ones who carry on criminal activity or black market activity, or what have you. Koreans have similar views of Japanese; that is, they have strong prejudices about Japanese, they are not similar views.

Those things used to affect, I think, some of the American correspondents who came over. I suppose if you had been a correspondent and had only served in Japan, not elsewhere in the world, and you came to Korea one week, sort of to get acquainted, you might have been appalled. The level of everything in Korea is considerably lower than in Japan. It is a much poorer country. Some people don't like dirt, and some people don't like poverty, and react to it. You used to run into the feeling among some of the correspondents, "Why can't these guys get it together?" They hadn't realized how far the country had already come.

Q: Let me add that I had served my first time in 1951. I was a corporal in the Air Force, and seeing where it was then and seeing where it was in 1976 was astounding. Most people don't have that perspective.

BENNETT: I had Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, North Africa perspective to look at, and thought the Koreans had done damn well.

End of interview