

AMBASSADOR MARSHALL BREMENT

Interviewed by: Thomas S. Estes

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Q: This is an interview with Ambassador Marshall Brement by Ambassador Thomas S. Estes. The interview is taking place on April 5, 1989 in Ambassador Brement's office at the Naval War College, Newport, R.I., where Ambassador Brement is the Director, Strategic Studies Group. This interview is part of the Oral History Project being conducted by the Association for Diplomatic Studies.

All right, Marshall, let's try it again. Run over your joining the Foreign Service.

BREMENT: Well, I joined the Foreign Service-actually quite by chance. I had always wanted to be a writer, that was all I was ever thinking of doing. But I'd gotten out of the Air Force and I was studying for a masters degree in American Civilization-a combination of American history and American literature and philosophy and political science and so forth. And I was in the library one day, supposedly studying for an exam, when the person who was sitting next to me left the college newspaper behind and so I idly picked up the newspaper. I read that some fellow was there to talk about a State Department career and miraculously he was about to talk within five minutes of the time I picked up the newspaper and the place he was going to talk was no more than ten yards away from where I was sitting. So I wandered in and it was Olcott Deming, who was a very polished and urbane Foreign Service Officer of the old school and I sort of liked the cut of his jib. His pitch was essentially to go ahead and take the test. It had been restructured at that point, it was no longer the old three-day test where you had to write...

Q: That's what I took.

BREMENT: ...a whole series of essay exams. It was more or less restructured to be a college board type test, I guess. His pitch was well taken, you had nothing to lose by taking it. And so I did and here I am.

Q: Well, fine. I took that old three and a half-day test so I know what you missed. The old biographic register shows that you entered the Foreign Service in 1956. You began to study Chinese at the Foreign Service Institute and in 1958 you were sent to the FSI field school in Taiwan. Can you tell us something about why you decided to study Chinese?

BREMENT: Well, again, it was sort of an accidental turn in my career. I came in, in March of '56, and took the old A 100 course for beginning officers and then was assigned to the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. I'd asked to go overseas but they said, "No, you have to go to Washington," and I was simply assigned to FE where I was the assistant staff assistant. The staff assistant was first a fellow named Newt Waddell, and then Owen Zurhellen, to Walter Robertson who was Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs and a very dynamic and polished Virginia banker gentlemen who'd been in Chungking during the war and then worked for General Marshall when he had his mission to China and had very, very strong views about China.

In any case I worked on his staff, partly as a staff assistant and partly as the author of the Far East Section of the daily secret summary, an old publication of the Department where I essentially summarized cables on a daily basis-important cables on the Far East to be read by the principal officers of the Department; and also wrote a weekly item on subjects of interest dealing with the Far East, an internal publication the Department put out at the secret level called "Current Foreign Relations". This was an excellent introduction to a Foreign Service career because it gave me the full range and the full sense of what was going on in a major geographic bureau of the Department. I was mildly interested in the Far East when I came in but I was pointing towards Europe. But this indeed awakened an interest in the Far East for me and so I applied for Chinese language training, and had a great deal of trouble getting in, by the way. It was only that I was working for the Far Eastern Assistant Secretary which allowed me to get into the course. Mostly because the head of Personnel at the time, whose name escapes me, had been an inspector and he'd inspected the language school in Yokohama and he found that of the four graduates two of them had decided it was a terrible mistake to study Japanese and wanted to go somewhere else. And I'd never even been overseas-I'd never been anyplace outside the United States except Canada or Mexico. And he decided that before I do something like take two and a half years of the taxpayer's money to study...

Q: That's why I asked. It's unusual.

BREMENT: ...I'd better at least look around and get a sense of the area, which was sensible enough. But there were no particularly attractive assignments at that time and indeed I felt that my exposure to the Bureau and to the general area was such that I knew what I was doing. So Walter Robertson, who was quite a desk-banger, and could handle a meeting, I would say, better than anybody I've ever seen in the US Government...

Q: Yes, I knew him.

BREMENT: ...in terms of getting his way, he almost always did. He got his way. So I entered Chinese language training and spent nine months at the Foreign Service Institute and then 18 months at the field school in Taiwan where we studied Chinese every day.

Q: That interested me because I studied Mandarin in Peking, China when I was in the Marine Corps. And then after that you...

BREMENT: After that I was assigned to Hong Kong. I had wanted to go to Taipei actually, but I couldn't complain too much about being assigned to Hong Kong. My first year in Hong Kong I was assigned to the Political Section of the Consulate working on China. Of course, in those days we had no relations with China and Hong Kong was the premier China watching post of the Department. In my first year I was in charge of the unit which published the survey of the China Mainland Press which was the standard source of reference both for the government and for the academic community on current developments in China. I had ten translators and 20 typists and we had a subscription list of about 600 and we turned out 60 or 70 single-spaced sheets of paper a day. I found that great fun and a great way to learn about China and my translators were an enormous source of knowledge. I only spent a year at that, then went off on home leave, and came back. And then I spent two years in the Political Section working on internal political developments in China.

Q: Do you still keep up your language?

BREMENT: Well, it's difficult. I've been learning languages wherever I've been for so long and they sort of drop away when they're not being used. But I would say that I certainly have day-to-day Chinese. I will always have that because I've raised three small children in a house where the servants spoke nothing but Chinese. So I'm still a pretty good man in a Chinese restaurant. But in terms of reading political editorials I'm not what I used to be.

Q: That was the level of my achievement. I could order a meal in Peking and I thought I had achieved a great deal. Well then, we come to '63 and you made a switch, another language, Russian which is quite a change. Do you want to comment on that and how it affected your subsequent assignments?

BREMENT: I've always been interested in the Soviet Union and Chinese and Russian seemed to me an excellent combination so I applied and, somewhat to my surprise, was accepted. I've probably had more language training at government expense...actually I came into the Department as what they called a language probationer. I had no language that I was sufficiently qualified in. I gave French as my language but I was not proficient enough in French to satisfy the Department's language requirements. In those days-I don't know what it is today-but in those days you couldn't get promoted...

Q: That's right. You couldn't get promoted.

BREMENT: ...until you'd achieved proficiency in a language. So while I was in Washington during my FE tour I studied French and then indeed satisfied the language proficiency requirement. Then I studied Chinese which is my second language, and then applied to study Russian and was accepted, which actually was very good planning by the Department because they had a specific job in mind, and that was to be the person in the Moscow Political Section to cover Soviet relations with East Asia- with all the countries from Oceania to the subcontinent-all the way from India to Australia, which I proceeded to do after studying Russian at FSI in Washington.

Q: In my day in Personnel we used to call that the Russian Circuit. You did the Russian circuit but you broke out.

BREMENT: Well actually, I came in sort of by the back door as a Far East expert. It was quite a good embassy at the time. I got there in '64 for the fall of Khrushchev and Foy Kohler was Ambassador, Walter Stoessel was DCM.

Q: Yes, I know both of them.

BREMENT: Mac Toon was the Political Counselor. I enjoyed that enormously. I wrote about 70% of the cables coming out of the Political Section because from '64 to '66 I had Sino-Soviet relations, the beginning of the Vietnam war, the coup in Indonesia, the downfall of Sukarno, the Indo-Pakistan war and the whole Indochina mess. Soviet- Japanese relations were always interesting. So it was a very active and satisfying and fascinating tour in Moscow.

Q: When did you break out of the Russian circuit? You went to the White House.

BREMENT: I really at that point thought of myself as a Far Eastern hand with Russian sort of a minor language. But I had never really worked on the Soviet Union, other than on Soviet relations with East Asia. When I left Moscow I went to Stanford. I had a National Institute of Public Affairs fellowship, which was a wonderful thing. It really gave you the whole run of Stanford University. You could take what you wanted, either for credit or for audit. And it was an exciting time in those days. It was the beginning of the cultural revolution in the United States. Things were happening in the Berkeley-Stanford area and it was immediately apparent to me that they were going to have a great effect on our foreign policy and what we were going to do in Vietnam. But nobody in Washington seemed to have woken up to that. Then after my year at Stanford I went back to Singapore, where I was head of the Political Section...

Q: I noticed that.

BREMENT: ...which was also a very interesting place, a very interesting time to be there. They'd just essentially been kicked out of Malaysia by Tunku and Lee Kuan Yew had always wanted to be the Prime Minister of Malaysia, not the Prime Minister of Singapore. And he was then trying to develop his concept of what Singapore was going to be as a little mini-state, which, his whole life before, he'd said was not viable. But he has managed to do it. It's one of the greatest success stories of the 20th century. My Ambassador was Frank Galbraith, for whom I had and have enormous admiration. We got along very well. He was very happy with me in the Political Section and I was very happy with him as Ambassador for the first two years. Then he went off to Indonesia and Chuck Cross came in as Ambassador. And when Galbraith got to Indonesia he wasn't very happy with his USIA organization and so he offered me the opportunity to come over there and run USIA

Q: Yes, I was curious about that. Not many switch over to USIA

BREMENT: USIA was not about to give away one of the PAO positions without kicking and screaming, which they did throughout my four years with USIA But Frank shoved it down their throats essentially. As a matter of fact he wanted me to come in as PAO right away but they wouldn't have that. They compromised and said I could be the Deputy for a year and if it worked out then I could be the PAO. Anyway, I worked out and so became PAO. Actually, I feel it was extremely valuable to have had that tour in my career. And I feel very strongly that the State Department is sort of a sick institution, and always has been in my view. And the Foreign Service is even sicker. And I think one of the many reasons for that-we could go into that if you wanted to-one of the many reasons for that is because our officers do not have genuine managerial experience.

Q: Cheers! Cheers!

BREMENT: But you know one of the problems is that Administration is not necessarily management.

Q: No, and it's never understood in the Foreign Service.

BREMENT: It is never understood. What you have to do as a manager is deal with people and budgets. Most Foreign Service Officers go through their entire State Department career, the successful ones, without ever having had to do either. The Ambassador has no control over the people he has. He basically has very little control over his budget except for his representation account and the other allowances which are for his personal use. But controlling the budget is not a managerial job. To be an Ambassador, it can be, but it certainly isn't. It's not the essence of the job. But there are jobs in the US Government, in the foreign affairs field, which are managerial. And a career officer in USIA, and this would be true for A.I.D., and it would be true for the Peace Corps, have more managerial experience than any State Department officer gets in any tour that he has. I mean, I've been head of the largest, I think, certainly the most important Political Section, in Moscow; I've been the head of an important medium-sized Political Section in Madrid, and I've been the head of a small Political Section in Singapore; all of them posts in which the Department was very interested. As far as I'm concerned there's no real managerial skills involved in being head of a Political Section, even a large one. I mean, essentially, in Moscow you read Pravda and you decide, "Well, we'd better write a cable about this," or "We have this cable in and someone has got to go over to the Foreign Office, somebody has got to do this...". And you say to the guy, "You write this cable or you do this...", that's not management. You're not throwing people and money at problems. Whereas in USIA that's exactly what you're doing. You have an aim. You have a certain budget. You try to take the people you have and use them. And you have local employees which, of course, you don't have, basically, in the State Department and embassy work. In any case, I really do feel my USIA job, as PAO especially, gave me the kind of managerial experience which would be very valuable for most of our Foreign Service officers.

Another problem the Foreign Service has is that the whole Foreign Service career, of serving abroad, tends to smooth you over. You tend to be a sort of an explainer of policy and on very good terms with the fellow sitting opposite you and you become a gentle soul. Put 20 years in the Foreign Service and then you become a gentleman and you shudder when it comes to conflicts. You try to avoid conflict at all cost. But the policy arena in Washington, you can be a nice fellow all right, but the quality you want in an officer working for you is aggressiveness. naked aggressiveness and not taking no for an answer. And the whole Foreign Service career shapes you the other way. What you have is quite the opposite from what you have in the military services where the colonels are a lot better than the lieutenants, with almost no exception. In the Foreign Service you have a large majority of senior Foreign Service Officers who are not only not better, but actually worse than they were 20 years previously.

Q: They haven't kept up.

BREMENT: Yes. It's because, if you go say to Helsinki, to Oslo, to Stockholm, where you're never dealing with an issue where you really have to pound the table with the local government; or try to get them to do something that they don't want to do; something that's distasteful to them; you're just not honing your own skills at persuasion and doing high policy. High policy is by its very nature conflictive. You have to have conflict and there are strong views in both directions. There are arguments both ways, and you've got to do your best to serve your masters and make sure that the policy you want prevails.

In any case, I got to Djakarta. I was the PAO there for three years. Then, when Bob Lincoln was leaving Saigon the director of USIA at that point asked me to go to Saigon.

Q: A very interesting time.

BREMENT: A very interesting time and essentially, what I did, was convert JUSPAO, the Joint US Public Affairs Office back into a USIA post. It was very large. I had something like 27 officers, 170 local employees, the Cultural Center in Saigon with 20,000 students and hundreds of employees there.

Q: There goes your management experience.

BREMENT: That was real management experience. A very sad time actually but certainly fascinating. Saigon was a fascinating city and actually a very pleasant city at that point. So I was there from March of '73 to June of '74. But in the spring of '74 Walter Stoessel was going back to Moscow as Ambassador. He wrote to ask me if I would like to be his Political Counselor. That was, to coin a phrase, an offer I could not refuse for a lot of reasons. So then I landed back in Moscow and at that point became a Soviet man. And despite my 12 years in southeast Asia, the East Asia people more or less after a couple years forgot I existed. But then I was in Moscow with Stoessel. Jack Matlock, who is now the Ambassador, was DCM. I was there for two years and was going to go back for another two years. But when we did not allow a Soviet Counselor at the UN-he was on home leave-to go back to the UN, they reciprocated against me. It was a rather outrageous case. Why we did it to him I don't want to go into here. But the Soviet response against me was truly outrageous because I was a State Department genuine Foreign Service Officer whereas he was a KGB officer. I was the number three ranking person in the embassy. When we said Counselor, in those days especially, it meant that you were head of a section, not that you had a certain rank. He was a counselor merely by his rank, not because he was head of a section. He was in New York at the UN Mission. I was in the embassy in Moscow. There was no rhyme, reason nor justice, nor any reason why we should have taken it the way we did. But it was an election period and Kissinger, for reasons of his own, did not want to make too much of it. So I found myself, very uncomfortably for the first time in my adult life, at a very bad period because it was between administrations, sort of waiting around for them to figure out what to do with me. This happened in August of '76 but it was not made public until November of '76. So I was sort of laying low. And then, of course, with the new administration coming in, and coming in November (whereas most jobs, of course, go out on the summer cycle), there really was nothing suitable anywhere or anyplace for me to go. So I hung around, to my disgust, until...actually Dick Solomon (who is now going to be the new Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs), and was then head of the Social Science Department of the Rand Corporation, asked me to come out to Rand and do some work for him there. Before that there I was, this relatively high-ranking officer in the State Department, for months just sitting around with nothing to do, which really irked me because there were a lot of things that could have been done. There were a lot of Task Forces in the Department, but I was the wrong grade for a Task Force because I was a Class I Officer which, I guess, in current terms, is a Minister-Counselor. That is a suitable grade to head a Task Force but not a suitable grade to be on a Task Force. Given the situation I was in, I just wanted to be useful. I was quite ready to do any kind of useful interim work, but nobody was asking me. In any case, this went on until May and nothing surfaced, nothing really came through. It was almost a year before I...

Q: I have never heard before...

BREMENT: I remember calling Personnel one day, Nobel Melencamp was the guy in charge of senior officers (he was Economic Counselor in Moscow when I was Political Counselor), and he said, "You know, there's just nothing available at this point. There's only one job at your grade level which is available in the whole area from the Far East to Europe and you wouldn't be interested in that." And I said, "Well, what is it?" And he said, "Political Counselor in Madrid." I said, "I'm interested." So one thing led to another and off I went to Spain. Wells Stabler was the Ambassador. He had to be talked into having this sort of retreaded Soviet type as his political officer. But first, in order to go to Madrid, I had to take a Spanish language course at FSI, because in Spain fluency in Spanish is absolutely necessary.

Q: Absolutely, yes, I've been there.

BREMENT: But, in any case, it worked out. I went off to Madrid and spent about a year and a half there on what is normally a four year tour. Reggie Bartholomew, actually he's just come back from Spain where he was Ambassador, now he's going to be Under Secretary for Security Assistance or something like that. Anyway, he was leaving the NSC staff. One day in April of '79 Brzezinski called me and asked if I wanted to be his Soviet man on the NSC staff.

Q: You were then in Madrid?

BREMENT: I was in Madrid. Completely out of the blue. Well, anyway, he offered me the job and without too much hesitation I took it. So I went back to Washington and was in charge of Soviet affairs on the National Security Council staff. I got there just in time for the summit where the Salt II agreement was signed. Of course it was never ratified. This was in June of '79. And then I was there for the crisis of the Soviet brigade in Cuba which nobody remembers anymore, which was a hell of an introduction to high policy for me, because I spent something like the first nine weeks in Washington working almost 24 hours a day, seven days a week. One of the things Carter and Brzezinski did was to cut the NSC staff because they were supposedly great critics of Kissinger with his very large NSC staff. But they were activists, and Brzezinski was as activist as Kissinger. So there I was in the middle of a crisis in charge of Soviet affairs with nobody, but nobody, the secretaries, but nobody else to help me. And what this meant was that we had daily policy meetings at the Under Secretary level. I was there, and David Newsom for the State Department, Frank Carlucci for CIA, Walt Slocum for Defense. We'd decide on doing something. Everybody would go back to his office and turn to one of his many assistants and say, "We need a paper on this, that or the other thing." But if I had to do anything, I had to do it myself, which has certain advantages, but not if you're in the process of moving.

The problem in Cuba was one of perception. The Soviets got an active sort of Brigade Commander in there and he started exercising his troops, which the previous guys hadn't been doing, so that our intelligence people, all of a sudden, picked up the signal of this activity in Cuba, which they hadn't seen before, and which was interpreted as an entirely new development, that is, that the Soviets had sort of sneaked in this brigade on us. We went public and said-well, first Senator Stone of Florida went public-and we essentially gave the Soviets an ultimatum saying, "We can't go on with ratifying Salt II unless you get that damned brigade out of Cuba." And the Soviets were saying, "What are you talking about?" They knew perfectly well that nothing had really changed.

Q: Yes, they'd been doing this all the time.

BREMENT: And as I say, we'd been having these policy meetings day after day. I'll never forget Walt Slocum, who was the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense at the time, coming into one of our morning meetings with transcripts of a John F. Kennedy press conference in 1964 in which Kennedy was asked, "What are you going to do about that brigade in Cuba?" And Kennedy said, "Well, you know, we've been going over this with the Soviets for quite some time, and Dean Rusk has been trying to negotiate it, and it's a thorn in our side, but basically, it doesn't make too much difference, and there's only four or five thousand of them, and what can such a small force really do, and so forth." In other words...

Q: '64!

BREMENT: And then CIA went back over the imagery, because they knew where the brigade was located and the images, the photographs, were all in the files but the US government simply forgot about it. There they were, they'd been there all the time, but no analysts were paying any attention to what was just another military facility.

Q: Lack of memory, lack of memory in the files. No institutional memory. That's why we're doing this. The Foreign Service Association trying to get these old histories so they will have something.

BREMENT: So in any case I had a very interesting time of it at the NSC. First there was the Cuban brigade crisis, and then of course the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Of course, it kept me busy, with Olympic boycotts, and grain boycotts, and all these rather silly responses that we made to the Soviets. but responses that had to be made. What people don't realize unless they work in the White House, or work for the President is that certain things happen, and the President has to respond. The system is set up so that he has to do something. And often when you start thinking of the things he can do, they don't really amount to much.

Q: A question just popped into my head, Marshall. How would you compare what you were doing in the NSC to what level in the Department a Foreign Service officer would have to get-Deputy Under Secretary to get involved in this level, Assistant Secretary?

BREMENT: A regional Assistant Secretary would probably be the correct counterpart in terms of protocol. But, of course, the regional Assistant Secretary has got his region, and he's dealing with all sorts of problems that I wasn't involved with. Actually, my counterpart at that time was really Marshall Shulman who was Ambassador-at-large and the Secretary's adviser on Soviet affairs and who had a small staff. In addition, he had the whole SOV office, more or less half working for him.

One thing in this context that might be interesting is the fact that the Department looks terrible, just terrible when you get over in the White House. The Department's unresponsive. It does poor and sloppy work for the President of the United States, which is really extraordinary.

Q: This I've heard before, several times.

BREMENT: The Department services the Secretary very well but its servicing of the President is simply abominable. And on the interagency level it just doesn't operate the way it should. And this is endemic. It's true of administration after administration. And, for that reason, President after President of the United States has basically mistrusted the Department of State, even though he'd worked very closely with the Secretary of State and the Secretary of State always says, "What a great Department and what a great Foreign Service we have." And indeed we have very able people in the Department of State but the Department just does things in the most abominable manner. The lower you get on the routine level, the worse it gets. For example, and it's a true example, let's say a summit conference of the seven major economic nations is about to take place. SS in the Department then sends out "taskers" to all the regional bureaus. And one of the "taskers" would be, say, to write a briefing paper on what the President is supposed to say to the Prime Minister of Britain when he sees her at this conference. So it will come down to the Bureau of European Affairs. It goes to the Staff Assistant. The Staff Assistant sends it to the Office of Northern European Affairs. And the Office Director gives it to the junior guy on the desk, who is just one year in the State Department. He sits down and writes up what he thinks are the main issues that the President might want to discuss with Mrs. Thatcher, which would be about a one page single-spaced document. Then he sends it out to 37 offices within the Government for clearance. Each of those 37 offices comes back and says, "Well, this is okay except that you've forgotten this one very important thing that I happen to deal with-say gun control with Northern Ireland," or whatever, "We'll clear the paper but you have to add the following three sentences to it." So this junior officer finally gets back these 37 responses, takes what everybody else has said to him and puts it all in this briefing paper, which becomes seven pages long, single-spaced. By that time they're running a little late in the Department, which is quite usual, and therefore the Assistant Secretary simply has no time to look at the paper, and certainly the Secretary doesn't have time to look at it either. And the Office Director is busy with some very important matter and doesn't have time to really focus on the thing, which is a little book covering all aspects of US-UK relations. He is not concerned, because he is not going to get in trouble, he's not leaving anything out of real importance, he's covered-he's covered his behind. So, over it comes to me on the President's staff in the White House and I am putting together this briefing book for the President. And here I have this seven page, single-spaced, memo. I look up the conference schedule, and note that the President is only going to be seeing Mrs. Thatcher alone when they ride over from the Japanese embassy to the Canadian embassy together, a total of 13 minutes. So I take this seven page memo and if I'm feeling charitable I put it in the burn bag. And if I'm not feeling charitable I send it over to Brzezinski under a covering note which says, "This is what the State Department thinks the President ought to say to Mrs. Thatcher in a 13 minute limousine ride." And I write a quarter-page memo, saying, "The last time you saw Margaret you said to her you were terribly interested in whatever, and she said to you, well, that's all right but don't forget the Polaris issue...", I cover one issue, and that's it.

The problem with the State Department is that you've got this enormous bureaucracy-too many people. And the only person who can really write for the President is the person who would write for the Secretary; and that's your Assistant Secretary in the Bureau, because he's the only person who genuinely knows what the President said to Mrs. Thatcher. He's been there. He's heard them talk to each other, he's got a sense of their relationship. But because he has this huge staff he can't write routine briefing memos. The system won't permit it. I'm not sure how you'd get around that problem.

Q: I'm not sure either. I've been assigned, for my sins, three times- and I'm 20 years into retirement and I'm still wondering about it. Well, you served there, then you became Ambassador.

BREMENT: Yes, I served there. Then I was asked by Jeane Kirkpatrick to come up to New York to be her deputy at the UN. That was not entirely a happy experience. She brought in all the people around her, some of whom were able, some not so able. But, in any case, they all came in with a very paranoid attitude towards the staff in that building, and some of them were very capable people with all the institutional memory that you need for dealing with UN matters. And, just by doctrine, the people Jeane brought in had decided that anybody who worked for Andy Young could not possibly work for Jeane Kirkpatrick, and could not be trusted. I found myself in the rather uncomfortable position of trying to mediate between the staff and the Ambassador and really not satisfying anybody, including myself.

Q: That's sad.

BREMENT: Yes, it is sort of sad. In any case I couldn't find anyplace in New York where I could possibly live.

Q: Yes, that's the other problem. A terrible assignment.

BREMENT: Yes. I couldn't believe what people were asking for places to rent. In any case, we reached a mutually satisfactory parting of the ways, and I think she did support me for another Ambassadorship, although it was stormy at first. So, in any case, after spending five months in New York, I was asked if I wanted to be Ambassador in Iceland and I said, "Yes, indeed," and off I went. But again it came completely out of the blue, with no particular rhyme or reason, but it turned out, I think, very happily for me anyway.

Q: I'm sure you must have enjoyed Iceland from all I've heard.

BREMENT: Iceland is a wonderful place. Both my wife and I are temperamentally suited to Iceland and to the Icelanders, except for the climate. My wife was born in the Philippines and likes southeast Asia and indeed claims she married me because I promised to take her to Saigon.

Q: Well I've known two Ambassadors to Iceland and both of them enjoyed the tour.

BREMENT: That's Jim Penfield, and who else?

Q: Tyler Thompson and the other one slips my mind at the moment. He's living up in the Boston area now. Did you have any particular crises while you were there. Oh, Fred Irving. Fred and I served together way back when. Any particular crises there, or anything that...

BREMENT: Well, the major US Government interest in Iceland is our base, which is a combined Navy and Air Force base. Iceland is really the anti-submarine capital of the world. The political structure of Iceland is such that you always have a coalition government, which sometimes is left-wing, which means that it includes the People's Alliance, locally known as the Communist Party in Iceland, but it's not really a Communist Party and never has been. It's a left-wing anti-NATO anti-US party, but it has never been under Moscow domination. It's a left-wing party, not a Communist Party. And, indeed, the conservative party is not what we would call a conservative party either. In their ideological stance, the Conservatives in Iceland equate to the center to left-wing of our own Democratic Party. The Social Democratic Party in Iceland is very conservative compared to the Social Democratic Parties of other Scandinavian countries. So the political spectrum is really very narrow and, indeed, it makes it possible for any of the parties to enter into a coalition with any other-the Conservatives could have a coalition with the Communists. It's a strange system in that sense. Iceland is unique in many ways, and it is certainly unique in that way.

In any case, the problem for the United States is that, given the political situation of Iceland, you often have a government, as you have right now, that will not allow any kind of major improvements in our base. They, more or less, can look the other way and let things continue as is, but if you want to make major improvements then you have real problems, because they will not be palatable to the left wingers. As a result of that, when I got to Iceland there were four major projects in abeyance which we were anxious to push forward: the building of a new air terminal; the building of a new POL storage facility; replacing the old F-4s with F-15s; and building a new radar net across the north of Iceland. (The previous one had been blown away one winter.) These projects totaled over a billion dollars and were CINCLANT's top priority for military construction in the entire CINCLANT area, which goes from northern Europe down to the tip of South America.

Well, CINCLANT's first four priorities, were all in Iceland and they'd been hanging fire for many years; some of them for as much as 10 or 15, while we waited to improve our facilities there. Iceland is, of course, invaluable strategically to us. It's just in the right place to control the exit from the north cape of Europe and it's the perfect spot for monitoring Soviet submarine deployment and also intercepting their planes as they come out around the north cape of Norway. It is the real focus of an Ambassador in Iceland; trying to get these things for our Navy, which is how I came to the attention of the Navy, I suppose.

There was a left-wing government in power when I arrived, but I fairly quickly saw...well, there are two things about Iceland that struck me immediately. One, first of all, because of the minuscule population it was possible for the United States Ambassador-quite literally, if he had enough representation funds-to shake the hand of every single Icelander who counts, everyone without any exception. You know, you can get them all in your house, you can break bread with them, you can have them to meals, but you have to be very active.

Q: And you have to have the allowance.

BREMENT: You have to have the allowance, yes, you should. And given the nature of Icelandic society, and the tremendous importance of the cultural life in Iceland-Icelanders are great poetry lovers-they love their literature. The greatest literature written in Europe in the 13th century was written in Iceland. The sagas are wonderful, but it's not only the Icelandic sagas, they've had a glorious and continuous literary heritage right through the ages. There is no Icelander who cannot quote, literally quote from memory, reams and reams of poetry. Anyone of them can do it, including the politicians. So it became apparent to me that if I was going to be an agent of influence, which is what an Ambassador should be, or a lobbyist, the way to do it was to get to know all the Icelanders who count and to be especially active on the cultural side, because that's what they really admire. I had to learn their very difficult language, give speeches in it, and not be a philistine American, but show them I was interested. I'd go to their plays. I'd go to the art exhibits. Basically it was very clear to me that that's the way for an Ambassador to go and that this would have a payoff, not just in the cultural area. I'm not talking about public relations I'm talking about the very practical achievement of what I wanted to do. I also knew that elections could not be delayed later than the summer of 1983 and that we could expect a change to a much more conservative government. When I got there in '81 inflation was running over 100%, the economy was...

Q: I hadn't realized that.

BREMENT: Oh, the economy was in desperate straits. They had two of the worst winters ever and the fishing industry, upon which Iceland depends, was in the worst state it has been in living memory. It was very clear to me, but not necessarily to the Department of State, that we were going to have a new government within 18 months after I arrived and the new government would be much more friendly to us. So I started cultivating the outs, the people who were the leaders of the conservative and Social Democratic parties; who had somehow never been to the residence of the American Ambassador before, and who, I thought, would be the most likely coalition partners.

In any case, the net result was that, when indeed the elections took place, the new government came in and simply wiped the US-Icelandic slate clean. I mean, in one very memorable meeting with the new Foreign Minister...

Q: You mean the projects?

BREMENT: All the projects. He gave the green light on every single one of them, worth over a billion dollars.

Q: Right time, right place and right approach.

BREMENT: It is the right approach. People get confused because in Iceland you shouldn't...its true, we're a big country, with a population a thousand times that of the Icelanders, so therefore people think a low key approach is the right one. But it isn't, because we're too big for that. If you're 7 feet 3 inches tall, walking with your shoulders slumped over will not make you inconspicuous.

Q: You don't think this boycott of the Burger Kings the other day will affect our relations with Iceland?

BREMENT: I don't know. What happened?

Q: Some activists who'd gotten together and want Burger King to stop buying Icelandic fish. It lasted a day.

BREMENT: I've been warning them about this type of possibility. The most exciting time I had in Iceland in terms of Ambassadorial influence was when I personally got the Icelandic parliament to vote against continuation of whaling. We were making our usual effort of...

Q: This is the group that was against Icelandic whaling.

BREMENT: My argument to the Icelanders has always been that whaling is less than 1% of their gross national product. What happens in the whaling arena can only be a minor nuisance or annoyance. Fishing is 76% of their exports, and of that 76%, about 20% goes to the United States. It goes basically to large restaurant chains, to Long John Silver, to Red Lobster. I didn't know about Burger King.

Q: One is down here in Middletown, they were parading up and down and got their pictures in the paper and then they disappeared. We were out of town, I think.

BREMENT: I missed that. That's exactly what I've always been warning the Icelanders about. This is not something that can be straightened out by the US Government.

Q: This group definitely wants to hurt Icelandic imports of fish in order to force them on the whaling question.

BREMENT: In any case, on the whaling question in 1983 it seemed we were in a totally hopeless situation. We had this letter from Deputy Secretary Ken Dam, to the Foreign Minister to urge that the Icelanders accede to a ban on whaling. This was really a sort of pro forma thing, because I knew both the political parties in the coalition had already expressed themselves against the ban on whaling. Then I got the word from some of my friends in the fishing industry that we really might be able to do something about this and there were a lot of members of the Parliament who could be influenced by the US So I started calling every member of the Althing, a real lobbying operation. The government made this a vote of conscience rather than a vote subject to Party discipline. The surprising result was that we actually won. It was all on television. Very exciting. Each Parliamentarian came up to the podium and explained his vote. We won 31 to 29. It was exciting. Then the Icelanders drifted back away from this position and this has caused the current flay with Burger King.

Q: Terrific. This is why I hope this oral history gets told because the public never hears this, not even our junior officers ever hear it.

BREMENT: Even the State Department doesn't understand what an Ambassador can do.

Q: No.

BREMENT: It's shocking really. I mean, even people in the career don't understand what an Ambassador can do, because in many cases they've never seen an Ambassador that can operate.

Q: And how you can operate.

BREMENT: An Ambassador is useful in heading off things, in preventive things. Seeing that things don't happen rather than necessarily making things happen. I mean, I can't tell you how many things I...

Q: Sure, you have to. The Department sends out, sometimes, instructions that make no sense whatsoever, but no one there knows what your country is about.

BREMENT: What people don't understand is that the Ambassador is an lobbyist, just like he's working for US Steel, except that he's working for the US Government. He's got all the skills of a lobbyist and there's only one way to be an effective lobbyist; that is, you know where the buttons are to push, and how to push them.

Q: And the people.

BREMENT: That is the people. It's always the people. I mean, how do you deal with an issue, whatever the issue is. You've got to know the government. And, of course, you have to know your own government because sometimes the entire problem is back in Washington. On these base questions, I found, time and again, that the Department of State just didn't back me up. I mean they were completely out of it. You had desk officers there who had never dealt with base questions and who...

Q: No background and no training.

BREMENT: Yes. Whereas the Navy was always 100% with me. They could see the point. Admirals, who deal with aircraft carriers which cost \$3 or \$4 billion dollars and command battle groups which costs \$17 billion dollars, can put bad issues into perspective. One of my first problems with the Department was a local fence that the Icelanders wanted us to build for \$95,000. This is an actual case in point. The Foreign Minister had a problem with a constituent, and he wanted us to build this fence on the base to stop children from cutting across base territory to avoid incidents with Marine Guards. So I talked to my Admiral, a very good man named Ron Marriott, and we determined that we could do it for \$95,000. The reason for 95 was because he had the authority to do minor improvements under \$100,000. I thought I was doing a good thing, but I made the mistake of reporting it in a normal reporting cable. I was then amazed to get this reply back from the State Department asking me to trade this fence for approval from the Foreign Minister to go ahead with the Helgevik oil storage project. Well, Helgevik was a \$250 million project. I replied saying something like, "You know you're not mixing apples and oranges. You're mixing grapes and watermelons. There is a way to get things done, with the Icelanders, or with any other human being, and this is not it. Let me take the responsibility for this, and it will work out all right for the US Government. Trust me." Thanks to CINCLANT, my view prevailed and we got approval for Helgevik in 1983.

I had the same thing on a new joint air terminal. One of the problems we had in Iceland was that the air terminal was the entrance point for everybody coming into the country and it was located in the middle of our base, so that every Icelander coming in or out of the country had to go right across a US Naval base. This is obviously not a good idea for the United States. It is just crystal clear that you want the civilian terminal of the only international airport in a country to be in some place other than your base. In any case, when Mondale was there in '79 he got Carter to agree that we were going to pay for half of a new terminal and the Icelanders would pay half, and we got an appropriation of \$20 million to do it. But then the government changed and this left-wing government came in-the same government that was there when I got there-and part of the government agreement was that they would not engage in anything new in the defense field and this was considered new. And indeed, after four years the appropriation was running out. I said, "Look, I want you to renew this appropriation because we are going to have elections next year and the right government is going to come in. That's my analysis." But the State Department said "No, you just hold their feet to the fire and at the last minute the Icelanders will cave." I went back and said, "Look, I'm here and I'm telling you they're not going to cave and you just don't understand what makes Icelandic politics. The point is that the Prime Minister wants to remain Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister wants to remain Foreign Minister and, if they cave, this government is going to go down. They don't want that." The Icelanders were finding all sorts of reasons to delay the project. They were stalling. They didn't want to break up their government. They liked being Ministers, which is very important in Icelandic politics-and in other politics as well.

Q: It's a good example of what we get into that, as I said, the public doesn't understand and you, quite rightly, said even sometimes the State Department doesn't understand. When did you come out of Iceland and retire?

BREMENT: I came out of Iceland and retired in September of '85-August 31, '85. Basically, we discovered that Pamela had cancer, and therefore we wanted to go back to the States and the best person to deal with her particular brand of cancer was at the Brigham Hospital in Boston. He's at Harvard Medical School. And so I looked around to see whether there was anything in this area, and oddly enough Al Bernstein, the head of the Strategy Department here, said he heard about me from somebody. He called me out of the blue.

Q: You get more "out of the blues".

BREMENT: Yes, really out of the blue. He actually called me before we knew Pamela was sick. He'd heard about me and knew I was just the person he wanted, and gave me a strong pitch. And I said, "I don't really know what's in my future. I'm mildly interested, not terribly interested, but let me think about it and I'll get back to you." But I really wasn't interested at all. Then Pamela went into the hospital for what we thought was a minor operation and they determined that indeed she had cancer. Then I became very interested because it was a perfect kind of assignment. And then John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy, called me and said, "I hear you want to go to the Naval War College." And I said, "Yes." And he said, "You don't want the State Department job. You want to be Director of the Strategic Studies Group." I said, "What's that?" So he explained to me what it is. That's how I ended up here.

Q: To the extent that you can in an unclassified discussion, you're supervising a group that's composed of-at least I know several Naval officers-is there a mix?

BREMENT: No, basically it's six Navy captains-one is a commander-and three Marine colonels.

Q: I'm glad to see the Marines are in there.

BREMENT: We work directly for the Chief of Naval Operations. We are quartered in Newport, but we don't report through the President of the War College. They service us administratively, but we work directly for the Chief of Naval Operations on a topic of interest to the CNO. The basic idea was that the Navy is a very closed institution culturally. Furthermore the warfare disciplines within the Navy itself are very cut off from each other, so that a submariner typically, for example, spends the first 20 years of his career doing nothing but driving submarines. And this same thing is true for some of the aviators as well. So, around 1980, when then Chief of Naval Operations Tom Hayward was made cognizant of this problem by his executive panel, they got this idea of taking people, and just sort of shipping them off to Newport and letting them have the leisure to read and talk to each other and see if they can come up with anything that's of use to the Navy. That's really how it got started.

Q: Wonderful. Terrific.

Ambassador Brement. It's really a very good idea. I think any large institution would benefit from it. What's good about it is that you're working directly for the Chief of Naval Operations and you have a travel budget so that you visit all the major commands, so that during the course of the year, you brief, you report to, and you absorb wisdom from all the four star admirals in the Navy, and not only in the Navy. You go to Harvard and the State Department and other places where you can find some additional wisdom and where your horizons can be broadened. The net effect on these guys is that after a year they come out really understanding the Soviet Union, the Soviet military, the Soviet navy. More importantly, they understand how the US Government operates, how grand strategy is made if it is made, or if it isn't made, and how the military operates, and how the Navy operates. I haven't had one who didn't get an awful lot out of his year. The other aspect is that the Navy, unlike the other services, really doesn't pay much attention to educating its senior officers. I'll bet, when you were here, I'm sure you didn't have any submariners at all, because Rickover wasn't about to send submariners up to Newport. I mean the students here weren't the fast trackers. Guys on the fast track were not sent to the War College. That's unlike the other services. And it's partly because the Navy is the active peacetime service. Indeed, the operating tempo that the Navy employs today would be the same that they would employ if there were a war on. In any case, the SSG is a way of educating them; coming up with a product for the Navy; and also of increasing the awareness of strategic questions within the fleet because they go from one place to another. The Pacific and the Atlantic navies are two different institutions.

Q: Another question, the idea that they come up to this Strategic Studies Group and find a civilian, a former Ambassador, directing it?

BREMENT: They see the use of it, if only to open doors.

Q: This is a far cry from World War II. As we mentioned earlier that the integration of...

BREMENT: The title itself is useful. In other words, if you're dealing with a military group, and you have the title of Ambassador, it gets you in the door in a way that even Admiral or General doesn't.

Q: I found it very useful when I was assigned here as a State Department adviser. But I still ran into officers who'd say, "What's a civilian doing here?" Except my Marine students all came up with a set of flags for me and they were so proud to have a former Marine private up here. But there was still a little residue, problems of what is State Department doing here. Its wonderful to see it changing like this. And I congratulate you personally on it, because I think it's just what we need, and I wish the State Department knew more about it.

BREMENT: But very basic to the concept of the Strategic Studies Group is the fact that these guys are real front runners, very much on the fast track. We've had 18 make admiral-there have only been 48 Navy officers in the group since the beginning and 18 have already been promoted to flag rank and another 18 are in the running. They still haven't come up for it yet. That's the reason why this group is so good and why indeed they can come up with a product that has been very, very useful to the Navy.

Q: Well it shows, I think, the mixing of the two. I remember Admiral Colbert when I was here, he was president of the War College, telling about his assignment to the Policy Planning Staff in the Department and they gave him a farewell party-end of career party. And then when he was up for admiral on the Policy Planning Staff, all of a sudden that became a prize assignment. And I think about every other one made admiral on that. Anyway, it's great progress for the country. Want to wrap this up? Have you any words of wisdom? I think the State Department should be particularly interested in your present position and this is one way to get it across.

BREMENT: Well, I've despaired of the State Department for many years because its an organization which doesn't run itself correctly. It doesn't understand what it's here to do. The people who run it don't even understand what they're supposed to do. I mean people on the Administration side who really don't understand what the rest of the Department is supposed to be doing.

Q: Correct, correct.

BREMENT: And, the way it's structured is just not what it is supposed to be. We have the need to develop a Foreign Service which is really second to none and we have the resources to do it. The fact of the matter is that our Service is not as good as most of the other foreign services. The British are much, much better. The French are better. And there's just no reason for that. What we have to understand is that what professionals provide is knowledge, expertise. And we have to do everything we can to generate that expertise and we just don't do it.

Q: I often think of Loy Henderson, whom I had the privilege of serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary, when we started the Senior Seminar in foreign policy. Loy saw this as one of the answers to the problem of broadening the Foreign Service mind, the whole academic year. Only Loy Henderson could have gone to the Congress and gotten the money for this, I think. And I was fortunate enough to attend the third one, and I've yet to see the kind of impact that Loy wanted and hoped for-God rest his soul-in the Foreign Service. Maybe it will come in another 20 years, I don't know.

BREMENT: The emphasis is all the other way. The point is that diplomacy is a profession, and has to be viewed as a profession. And a profession has a certain body of knowledge that everybody should have to be professionally qualified. And that means, to be a diplomat you should have a basic general cultural knowledge level to specific communication skills. In addition to that, you should have a specific knowledge level. There is no reason in the world why we should not be getting the very best people out of our universities that deal, say, in the Russian field. Go to the Russian Research Center at Harvard and find out how many of their students are going to become Foreign Service officers. The answer is zero. Why not take someone into the Foreign Service who is already fluent in the Russian language and a genuine expert on Russia? Why not recruit people like that? And that's not only true of the USSR. Why not do this same thing for Scandinavia, every place, Latin America? Our embassies should be full of the brightest people this society possesses, because they can do an awful lot for us. But people just don't...

Q: Its discouraging. I spent seven years on the staff at the University of Rhode Island as Assistant Director of an international group there. Not once did the Department ever send anyone to the university to recruit, and the university showed no interest whatsoever, even though they had some fine political science professors, in training anybody, or promoting the Foreign Service for anybody. It was a standoff.

Well, Marshall, thank you very much. Unless you have something else to add, I will say that this completes the interview with Ambassador Marshall Brement for the oral history program with the Association for Diplomatic Studies. Marshall, I personally thank you very much for your time. You have given a lot of time and effort to this. I appreciate it.

BREMENT: Thank you very much.

End of interview