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

AMBASSADOR JANE ABELL COON

Interviewed by: Ann Miller Morin

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Q: Jane, let's begin at the very beginning. Where were you born?

COON: In Dover, New Hampshire, at the Wentworth Hospital.

Q: And your parents lived in Durham, which is the home of the University of New Hampshire. Your father was on the staff of the university, was he not?

COON: He was a member of the faculty, yes, in the college of agriculture, as an agricultural economist.

Q: And you have three siblings. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your brothers?

COON: I'm the youngest of four children. My oldest brother is seven years older than I am, and he went into secondary school teaching. My second brother is six years older than I am. He went into university teaching-chemistry. My third brother is three years older than I am, and is a librarian in Mexico.

Q: What about your family background, Jane? The name, Abell, is that of Germanic origin, or is that English, or what?

COON: Apparently the family came from England but it may-way back in the mist somewhere-have been an anglicized German name. But there are Abells in England.

Q: I see. And your mother's maiden name?

COON: Bennett.

Q: I believe her name was Virginia, was it not?

COON: Yes. Virginia.

Q: And your father was?

COON: Max Abell. Q: And your mother was of English origin, was she?

COON: Her grandparents, on both sides, I think, came from England.

Q: So on both sides you are of English descent. Has your father's family been in this country a long time?

COON: Yes, longer than my mother's family, but we never really sorted out all of that.

Q: What sort of religion did your family practice?

COON: The only Protestant church in Durham when I was growing up was a Congregational Church, and we were all members of the Congregational Church.

Q: Did religion play much of part in your life, Jane, or just on Sundays?

COON: Yes. I mean all of us went to Sunday school, willy-nilly. And my father was something of a stalwart, a member of the board of deacons, and head usher. I think at various times he was head of the Congregational Conference in New Hampshire and head of the State Council of Churches of New Hampshire.

Q: How did you get along with your brothers?

COON: Generally, I think quite well. I was the youngest, and I think they-particularly the oldest-could probably do no wrong as far as I was concerned. You know, there was a certain amount of tussle, a relatively active family. It was not all totally placid. They included me in a lot of things, skiing in the wintertime and ice skating. They'd take me along. I remember hiking in the White Mountains. I think it may have been of some significance in my later career that I probably felt an enormous impetus to keep up with them, so that I'd be taken along on these ventures.

Q: That's a considerable amount to be younger than, too. The closest one is three years older. That's a tremendous disadvantage to work out.

COON: Well, I don't think disadvantage, but anyway I worked very hard to keep up so they would continue to take me along.

Q: Did they also teach you other things, such as to read? Were you a very early reader?

COON: Gosh, I don't remember. No, I don't think they taught me to read. My memories of my activities are largely outdoors. We lived in the country, and there was a lot of gardening and outdoor activity and chores. We had chickens and cut our own firewood. Remember the great hurricane of '38?

Q: Yes, indeed I do.

COON: I remember spending winters after that-particularly with my brother, Richard-cutting wood, blow-downs.

Q: Yes, I remember-because I remember you as a little girl-that your brother was very, very fond of you, and you sort of hero-worshipped him, I guess.

COON: I suspect also it meant that as far as I was concerned, work was fun. Going out and cutting wood and loading it on a sledge that we hand-pulled, probably a half a mile to the house, with firewood, after the hurricane. I thought it was just marvelous. Great fun.

Q: It occurs to me that, having grown up in a family of brothers, you learned very early how to navigate in a man's world, didn't you?

COON: Probably. I don't know if I ever thought of it that way.

Q: Other than work, did you ever play with them? I suppose they'd be much too big to permit you to play football or whatever young boys do when they roughhouse.

COON: No, I remember playing games with the youngest of my three brothers, Bob. I remember, we used to have a clay table, and we played games where you made armies out of clay and had great battles and that sort of thing. Not throwing it at each other. We were not terribly well-off during the Depression. Faculty salaries were cut-not that faculty salaries were very high under any circumstances. I think they all took, in the Depression, a 10 or 15 percent cut. So that we had to make an awful lot of our own games, and I think probably used a lot of imagination.

Q: All your family were good students, weren't they?

COON: Ultimately we were all good students. My eldest brother was actually a rather mediocre student, particularly in later elementary school and most of high school. He was very much of a B and C student until, toward his senior year, he decided he wanted to go to Cornell, and he suddenly decided he had to study and turned his marks around. I can remember my mother actually saying-I don't know whether I remember. You know, there's much that you think you remember that actually comes down in the family as mythology. But I think I remember my mother shaking her head and saying that she wasn't the least bit sure that Richard was "college material." A term we used at that time.

Q: I always thought he would grow up to be a farmer. He seemed to love farming so much.

COON: That's what he wanted to do.

Q: Instead he got into teaching.

COON: Well, that was because of polio.

Q: That was because of the polio, yes. That brings up another subject. That happened during the war, as I recall-your brother got polio. But before that time, did anybody in your family have any serious illnesses, Jane, that would have affected your growing up?

COON: I don't remember that they did. I mean we had all of the standard whooping cough and measles and chicken pox and all of that sort of business. I very nearly died of appendicitis. I was about six. Before they had antibiotics.

Q: Did that keep you in bed a long time?

COON: I don't think so, because it happened in the summer. I was six, so it must have been just before I went into first grade.

Q: Did this change the way the family treated you? We've already established that you were the little girl who came along long after the boys. You must have been somebody's pet, Jane, if not both mommy and daddy's. [Laughter]

COON: Let me put it this way: I think I was generally welcome.

Q: You were very welcome.

COON: My mother had wanted a daughter very badly, and when I came along, that was just fine as far as they were concerned.

Q: Gave you an immediate acceptance. Sometimes when that happens the baby is treated almost like a toy by the others. Did you ever have any of that feeling?

COON: I don't think I was very toy-like, because I was probably a fairly thorough tomboy with three brothers I was trying to keep up with. I almost never played with dolls, for example. I was always trying to do something else outdoors.

Q: Yes, and nobody foisted the dolls onto you?

COON: Probably every once in a while they'd give it a try. [Laughter]

Q: What about what we used to call "womanly pursuits," sewing and cooking? Did your mother get into those with you at all?

COON: We all had chores, you know, things we had to do, and I was always expected to dry dishes and put them away, and help out-set the table and what not, at an early age.

My mother sewed but I think very badly, if the truth be known. I didn't realize this for years, but long after I grew up, I realized that my mother probably had about as poor small motor coordination as anyone I can think of. Her fingers were always cut from working around the kitchen. Yet for economic reasons she felt she had to sew for us children, and she worked at it, and it must have been just awfully hard, you know, with really poor small motor coordination. She even took a tailoring course at the university when I began to get up toward high school level, so she could make a suit and a winter coat for me. It must have been very painful over the years.

Q: Things you don't realize till we ourselves. . .

COON: That's right. I'm sure she didn't realize it either, because we didn't talk "small motor coordination" and that sort of thing. She was a very poorly coordinated woman. Very intelligent, very bright, but working with her hands was not something, I think, that came naturally.

Q: A very charming woman, your mother was.

COON: I guess so.

Q: Were you close to her, Jane, growing up?

COON: Yes, I think as close as people of my generation were to their parents. I don't know about you, but parents were parents then, and in New England you didn't talk about feelings and that sort of thing. But yes, within that context, I guess I would say I was.

Q: What about your dad?

COON: Probably closer to my mother than my father.

Q: I know that your brothers certainly respected your father, held him in awe practically.

COON: Yes, but he was not a terribly warm man.

Q: Did you have the usual bedtime stories read to you?

COON: Yes, I have a memory of both parents reading. That was again, being the youngest. We had the complete set of My Bookhouse. Of course my brothers were always-when I was ready for book one-they were already in book four. I can still remember being scared to death by some of the stories that they would read to my brothers out of book four. One called "A Secret Door," about Roundheads and English Cromwellians.

Q: Priest holes, and that sort of thing. Children live in a terrifying world, don't they?

COON: They do. You know, the stories were quite appropriate to my brothers.

Q: Was your father a very authoritarian figure in the family? Did you all sort of jump when he spoke?

COON: He was a very moody man. No, I don't think we jumped when he spoke. I don't think that. He traveled a great deal, because he was in the extension service. I don't remember this as much as my brothers do. He would leave a list of chores, you know, weed the strawberries and that sort of business, when he went off on a trip. He'd be back on Friday, and Friday afternoon there would be a great deal of weeding going on, before he got back. [Laughter] But no, he was not extremely authoritarian. We were more raised by our mother than our father.

Q: What I'm trying to get here is a feeling of whether or not you were treated differently than your brothers were because you were the little girl. Did he perhaps excuse you where he would not the boys?

COON: Gosh, that's a hard one. I apparently had a very sunny disposition and was a very cheerful child. I don't think I was disciplined as much as my brothers. You know, it's hard for me to recall a comparison. Probably I was treated a little bit differently because I was a girl. I think my father probably had more stern expectations of my brothers, but on the other hand, I was expected to perform in school just as well as they were.

And I was also generally given responsibility. My father had the notion that we ought to be responsible for something around the place, and also we ought to learn how to keep accounts and minor business practices. So we had chickens, and my brothers started out-Richard had the chickens first. We had about-it varied from a hundred, hundred and fifty chickens. And it involved collecting the eggs, candling the eggs, and developing an egg route, and delivering eggs every Saturday afternoon. And that went from Richard to Paul. Paul had the chickens for a while, and Bob had the chickens for a while, and then the chickens devolved on me. And you were allowed to keep the profits, which were not great, and you had to keep account books. [Laughter]

So in that sense, it devolved on me the way it had gone to my brothers. The exception, however, that was made in my case-I'm rather grateful actually-was that my brothers were expected-when people ordered roast chicken, or the flock had to be culled-to kill the chicken and pluck it. But my father would do the killing of the chicken and pluck it for me.

Q: So gender did count-in a positive way.

COON: Gender did count, as far as I was concerned, in a positive way. [Laughter] I guess I did some of the plucking but he did the killing.

Q: Very good. Do you remember, at an early age-you say you were expected to perform in school-was it a given in your family that you would all go to college?

COON: I think, yes, there was never any expectation otherwise. Yes, it was a given.

Q: Were you led to what career you would choose, or was that left up to you?

COON: No. That was not a given, that was wide open as far as our parents were concerned. I think the given factor was partly that both of my parents were college graduates themselves, but in both cases they were the first in their families to go to college. My father, who came from a farm, went to Cornell, and he ultimately got his doctorate. And my mother went to Mount Holyoke. So that there was a high value placed on college. Then since we were in a college town, it just never occurred to any of us, I think, that everybody didn't go to college. You probably came from the same kind of background, didn't you?

Q: Exactly, yes. There was never any question you were going-you didn't know how you were going to go, necessarily. [Laughter]

COON: You didn't know how or when, necessarily, but it never occurred to you that there was any other option.

Q: What sort of early books did you like, Jane? Do you remember?

COON: What was that series of books about animals? You know, Peter Rabbit.

Q: Beatrix Potter?

COON: No, Beatrix Potter came after. Anthropomorphic animals. Peter Rabbit and Reddy the Fox and Jimmy Skunk.

Q: Thornton W. Burgess.

COON: Thornton Burgess. Thornton Burgess books from end to end.

Q: They were wonderful.

COON: My Book House, at a very early period, reading them out loud. Kipling's Just So Stories I adored. Then a little later when I was reading myself, I remember getting into that twin series, the little Dutch twins and the little Eskimo twins and whatnot.

Q: Mexican twins, the Dutch twins; I loved it.

COON: Must have been the most god-awful stereotypes.

Q: Must have been terrible. There was always a boy and a girl.

COON: Yes, there was always a boy and a girl. The most terrible stereotypes.

Q: I know. Did you read the Bobbsey Twins, speaking of stereotypes?

COON: I never did like the Bobbsey Twins. I gave it a stab but I never liked the Bobbsey Twins.

Q: I suppose in your family you would have had the boys, the Rover Boys or the Hardy Boys?

COON: We never did get into the Rover Boys and the Hardy Boys, much, strangely enough. Of course we had access to the university library, with that wonderful children's room there, and I used to spend a lot of time at the library. I can remember in seventh and eighth grade getting very much into historical biography, and I suppose historical romance. And then the day came when I read Gone With the Wind.

Q: That would be about the hurricane time, probably. Or maybe you were too young to read it when it first came out.

COON: I was too young.

Q: Because that's the summer it came out, you know.

COON: Yes, it must have been in the early forties that I read it.

Q: Well, that was quite an exciting thing, Gone With the Wind. That was a real grown-up book.

COON: Oh, boy, that was. There's a story now of my mother trying to pry me loose to come to supper. I was reading Gone With The Wind. Exactly the same thing happened when I became a mother, and my twelve-year-old was reading Gone With the Wind, and I was fussing uproariously to get her to supper, and then thinking, "Oh, my stars." [Laughter]

Q: Isn't that funny? Well, it still pulls. Other than your brothers, with whom did you play, Jane? Did you have a whole series of little friends in Durham?

COON: When I was quite small, four, five, six, there was a little boy in the neighborhood my age. We played together. Then after he moved away, there was a girl a year older than I was, whose older brother was the same age as my brother. I played with her, quite a lot.

Q: How old were you when you got your first library card? Can you remember that? Was that an event in your life?

COON: Oh, my stars. I don't remember if we had library cards. I don't think in Durham we had library cards. You checked books out, and I must have checked books out at very, very early age.

Q: Were you permitted to go anywhere in the library?

COON: It was open stacks. As a small child-remember the Charlotte Thompson room? Aunt Lottie was still alive when I was a little girl. Aunt Lottie was a formidable old lady that I thought was probably a hundred and fifty years old. She was probably not much older than I am now. [Laughter] She was the children's room librarian, and you could go in and browse and take out books. And then eventually you graduated to the open stacks. It was a good library.

Q: Wonderful advantage. Did you spend a lot of time there alone in the library?

COON: I don't think so. I think when I was small my mother would take me down to the children's room, and maybe take me along with the older ones. Then when I got into upper elementary school we'd go as a group of girls over to the library. The library was part of my socializing because there wasn't a whole lot to do in Durham. [Laughter]

Q: You went to the local Durham school?

COON: I went to the Durham schools, yes.

Q: They had their own high school at that time?

COON: No, they had no high school in Durham, so we had to go to Dover.

Q: You did too? I didn't realize that. I knew your brothers did, but I didn't realize you did. So you went over to Dover High School.

COON: I went over to Dover High School for just one year. That must be-it was early in the war-it wasn't too early-'44 or something like that. The standards of Dover, I don't think, had improved a great deal since you were there.

Q: No, they were pretty poor.

COON: Not A-Number-One. And we couldn't participate in any extracurricular activities because we had to take the bus over and the bus home, and with gas rationing there was no flexibility. So that it meant really just going over and coming back. I think I was dissatisfied. I'm not quite sure why, but I wanted to go away. I wanted something more than that.And I think my mother, who had been a Latin teacher, was quite aware that I was not getting an education, despite the fact that my report cards ranged from three A+'s and two A's to four A+'s and an A. My mother would look at my report card and see I'd gotten an A+ in Latin, and she knew I didn't know any Latin at all.

Q: Did you have Miss Buckley?

COON: Yes, I had Miss Buckley. The kids from Durham almost automatically got A or A+'s. It didn't make any difference whether you knew anything. I should think that would have been infuriating to the Dover kids.

Q: Oh yes, it was. Although I don't know; I always sort of associated myself with the Durham kids.

COON: But that must have been infuriating, because we scarcely opened a book and always got As.

Q: Yes. Well, you were all bright enough. After all, you came from a select background; every one of you did.

COON: And we came from a good elementary school, but that didn't mean that we were learning all that much.

Q: There were very few good teachers.

COON: I think I had been academically competitive in elementary school. It was a most unbelievably stable environment, when I think of what my adult life has been like. I entered kindergarten, went through eighth grade in the same school, with probably two-thirds of the class unchanged. In other words, I entered kindergarten and graduated with probably about two-thirds of the same people. I can still remember the name of, I think, every teacher I had in elementary school. There were good ones and bad ones, but there were some very good ones, and some very demanding ones.

Then we also had practice teachers from the university and we became extremely skillful at driving them absolutely bats. Because, you know, we had more practice with practice teachers than the practice teachers had with us. It must have been a fate worse than death. [Laughter]

Q: You probably culled a great many people who never should have been teachers right out of the profession.

COON: We probably culled them right out of the profession. Probably did a great service to the teaching profession. [Hearty laughter]

Q: Yes, because the education department wasn't very good over there.

COON: But we had a very good class, quite a competitive class, that went all the way through elementary school as a cohort. And there was always a certain amount of competition as to who came out first in the state achievement tests. It was usually between me and one of the boys in the class. There were about three of us jostling to be in the top position. So fairly early on, I think I was academically competitive. I was not satisfied unless I was one of the top two or three of the class.

Q: Yes, it gave you a goal, didn't it?

COON: Yes. You had a goal of being one of the top two or three, preferably the top. Yes.

Q: Did it bother you terribly if you came in second, or heaven forbid, third?

COON: I didn't like it. I don't think I went into a snit. I never did quite as well in math as that boy in the class, but I frequently did better in social studies and English.

Q: What about games? Were you on any sports teams?

COON: In elementary school I'm not sure we had any competitive sports. I remember winter sports a lot-tobogganing, sledding, playing king of the mountain. Again, particularly in the earlier stages of elementary school, I engaged in free-for-alls, girls and boys playing together in the snow. I don't remember spring and fall as much. I remember playing softball-scratch games, pick-up. It was less organized athletics, particularly at the elementary school level.

Q: I'm getting a picture of a little girl who's surrounded by people much of the time. You didn't spend much time all alone?

COON: Well, to some extent, because I lived outside of town. We lived about a mile from T Hall.

Q: On Mast Road, didn't you?

COON: On Mast Road, which meant that if I stayed down at school for something after school, or to play with friends on Madbury Road near the school, I'd have to walk home. I got quite used to walking home alone. That was my time alone. I also read a lot, read a great deal.

Q: But you were a social little animal?

COON: I was a pretty social animal.

Q: It's interesting how one makes these choices early on. You were saying that your mother was very unhappy with your lack of Latin and other subjects, so what happened?

COON: The daughter of my mother's college roommate had gone to Northfield. We sort of had family connections with Northfield-Mount Hermon. I look back and think the initiative was largely my own, and I think at least it was in part my own. That I made up my mind that I wanted to go away to Northfield, and my mother must have been supportive of this. It was a financial issue, and I had to get a half-scholarship. Not quite a half-scholarship, because I think Northfield at that time charged four hundred and twenty-five dollars a year, and I got a two hundred dollar scholarship.

Q: You don't mean it! Four hundred and twenty-five dollars a year?

COON: That's my recollection. I think they went up to five hundred and twenty-five dollars before I graduated.

Q: Who gave the scholarship?

COON: The school, I guess, at that point, but later on I got another scholarship. So my sophomore year I went to Northfield, which was my first time away from home.

Q: How did that go?

COON: It was complicated that summer because my eldest brother, Richard, at the Agricultural Experiment Station in Ohio-he was a conscientious objector. He was detailed from some camp for conscientious objectors to the Agricultural Experiment Station in Ohio. He came down with polio in early August, so my mother had to go out. He was taken to the hospital in Cleveland and was not expected to live, and my mother went out, and my father went out, and a neighbor, a very close friend and neighbor, helped me get ready for school. I can remember sewing on labels.

Q: This was your first year away?

COON: Yes, that was just before I left for Northfield.

Q: And this awful thing happened in your family that summer?

COON: Yes, yes. I still remember this neighbor coming over and helping me to sew on name tapes-I was so unsophisticated. I mean we only went to Boston once a year.

Q: We were. Well, you remember Ernie Pyle referred to the University as "Cow Hampshire."

COON: That's right. [Laughter]

Q: And we were all furious, but he was not wrong.

COON: He was not wrong. I mean Boston was an event once a year.

Q: Oh, it was the big city!

COON: It was the big city.

Q: I know, but it's a good background all the same.

COON: There's much to be said for a small town because there's enormous stability there. I guess my father came back just before I left for school and drove me down to school. I'm not even sure of that.

Q: Now where were your other two brothers at this time?

COON: Paul was in the Army, and Bob was not.

Q: He would be in high school. No, three years older-he would have just finished, wouldn't he?

COON: He would have been about a senior in high school, or he would have just finished.

Q: That certainly must have taken a terrible toll on your family, your brother's illness.

COON: That was a very bad time. My father had always wanted to farm himself and to have his eldest son now wanting to go into farming pleased him a great deal. And of course, this cut out the agriculture from my brother's future. He was in the hospital from that August to a year from the next December. Sixteen-seventeen months in the hospital.

Q: But there was no question that you would not go on to school?

COON: No, no. For my parents it was a very upsetting period, as you might guess. Anyway, this neighbor got me ready to go. There was another girl from Durham going to Northfield the same year, and we were being tutored in Latin and algebra. Despite having gotten A+'s our parents were conscious of the fact that we might not be quite up to snuff. Quite right! So I went off and I got hideously homesick.

When my mother came back from Cleveland she stopped in Northfield. I must have gone up about the first or second week of September, and she must have come back in early October. I formed the habit then, which went on with very, very few exceptions, of writing my brother a postcard every day.

Q: Did you? What hall did you stay in?

COON: It was Weston Hall. Northfield was a bit of a shock, because I went into Latin II and was promptly put on probation. That, for somebody who was competitive, was a great blow. I can still remember, they'd already had the "ablative absolute" in first year Latin. I'd never heard of the wretched thing. And then in geometry, I had to take a special section of make-up algebra, and that was quite a come-down. I took ancient history, which was all right. But I survived Latin just by the skin of my teeth. I was nearly put back in Latin IB.

Q: So what was your reaction? To study harder?

COON: Yes. I went to work. Studied harder and squeaked through. I think I got a C the first term, and I finally brought it up to a B+ the second term. I got through second-year Latin and I decided not to take any further chances with Latin. [Laughter]

Q: So you switched to French, perhaps?

COON: I took Spanish.

Q: Spanish. More useful in your line of work, I would think, than the Latin, although one never knows.

COON: Generally speaking, I think I got a first-rate education. You know, it was a strictly girls' school.

Q: What interaction did they have at that time with Mount Hermon?

COON: Rare. When I think of the coeducational environment today, I feel like an artifact. We had maybe one or two dances a year. If it were two, the second one was usually cancelled because some boys got mumps or something. They would be quarantined.

There was a marvelous event called a parlor date. If you actually knew anybody at Mount Hermon-of course it was very difficult to know anybody at Mount Hermon, because you had almost no contact-the boys were allowed to walk over from Mount Hermon, five miles away, and sit in the parlor or walk around in the interior of the campus, where you were highly visible, for something like two and a half hours on Saturday afternoon and then walk back.

Q: Sounds like a barrel of fun.

COON: Absolute barrel of fun! [Laughter]

Q: Did you not skate together?

COON: I think once in my career the boys came over, and we had a skating party. I guess we went to one or two football games, but even that was not too common. It was a highly segregated institution.

Q: They really weren't out to develop your social skills, were they?

COON: They were not out to develop your social skills with the opposite sex.

Q: The opposite sex, yes. What about music? They have such a wonderful musical program there. Did you participate?

COON: Yes. I am not terribly musical and I don't have a good voice, but I like to sing, so I was in the large choir which anybody could get into. Therefore I was in choir. [Laughter] There were other levels of chorus, and I never quite made it into the next level.

Q: You had to participate in the church services, too?

COON: Oh, yes. Had to go to chapel and church. Required Bible, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Q: We know you didn't like Latin, for very good reasons. What subjects did you like?

COON: I'm about to go back next June to my fortieth reunion. I just got called the other day and asked to be class speaker. I have never been back at Northfield for any event although I've been back on the campus a couple of times just to see it. I haven't really thought too much about those years, but I realize that the teachers I remember are those I would describe as the old dragonesses. It wasn't the young teacher fresh out of college who was closer to our age in style. It was the older teachers, whom I think we all considered, almost without exception, to have been ten years older than God and were probably all of forty-five, who were very strong personalities. They were the kind of teacher that grew out of the social environment of the '20s and '30s. A single woman who dedicated her life to teaching and who was tremendously involved with the subject that she was teaching. Those are the ones I remember-the tough ones.

And to get back to your question, those were the courses I liked. I just loved Old Testament, of all things.

Q: Because of the historical context, was it?

COON: I think already I was moving toward the social sciences. I decided fairly early on.

Q: So I suppose you elected to take all of the history courses that they offered?

COON: I think I only had two. I had Old Testament and ancient history, then I had a superb American history teacher in my senior year. Then a great senior English teacher. I can still remember her teaching Antigone and the sheer excitement of it.

Q: Were these women role models, to you, or did you just appreciate that they were doing their best for you?

COON: Since the term "role model" wasn't current at the time, I don't know. I don't think they were role models in the sense that I saw myself as going into secondary school teaching, no. But they were strong women. They were intelligent women. They were women who placed a great deal of value on achievement, and academic achievement, and on social service. They just opened windows to somebody who was enormously curious-I think I was probably always very curious. To discover that the Old Testament wasn't what it was in Sunday school. It was living history. That they were real people. It was just wildly exciting.

Q: So what did this do to your marks? Did you work your way up toward the top of the class again?

COON: Yes. I ended up on the honor roll.

Q: Which of course made your choice of a college . . .

COON: I wasn't at the top of the class but I was in, certainly, the upper 5 percent.

Q: What sort of things helped you to decide on where you were going to college?

COON: Largely economics. [Laughter]

Q: Yes, I can remember well.

COON: How well you know. The obvious choice and the expectation was that I'd go back to the University of New Hampshire, where I could go tuition-free and live at home. But having been away from home for three years, that was not an attractive prospect. Not that I didn't get along with my family, but I just felt it hard to go back.

Q: Yes. It's time to move on.

COON: Yes. My mother had been at Mount Holyoke, and I interviewed at Mount Holyoke. I don't think I ever actually completed the application because at Mount Holyoke the tuition was about twelve hundred dollars a year then. Twelve hundred seemed an astronomical sum, even if I got a half scholarship. Six hundred dollars was more than we could handle at that time. I may have underestimated myself. I did not complete the application and apply for a full scholarship, and I have no idea whether I would have gotten one. If I had I would have probably gone to Mount Holyoke.

But not feeling that I could make it economically, I decided I would try Wooster College in Ohio. My oldest brother had been at the Experiment Station before he got polio, and he had some friends there that were on the faculty at Wooster, who had a daughter my age and were prepared to let me work for my board and room.

Q: Sort of au pair.

COON: It probably wasn't au pair in the sense there were smaller children.

Q: No, but I meant living as an equal in the family.

COON: Yes, that's right. And then the issue of a scholarship arose, for the tuition, which of course was less than Mount Holyoke. Finally, I only got a half-scholarship. There probably weren't a lot of scholarship funds.

I guess my junior year at Northfield-I'm not sure about my sophomore year-my scholarship was picked up as a Jessie Munger scholarship. Jessie Munger was a wealthy woman who lived in New Jersey, and I don't know very much more about her. She gave some buildings to some institutions, some colleges, I understand. I think she donated a good bit to Northfield. And she also provided-and I don't know how many-six, eight, ten-scholarships to girls at Northfield. I don't know whether there were any other schools involved. I think maybe there were half a dozen of them at Northfield.

And they were rather personal. You had to keep your marks up, and you had to write to Miss Munger and send her your marks at the end of the term, and she would write back. There was a little bit of personal correspondence involved. She had rather spidery handwriting. She would say she was pleased and what not, and looked forward to another year.

I'd just about given up hope on Wooster when I got this letter from Jessie Munger saying that she would provide me a scholarship to college, and that went on for four years at Wooster. She gave me two hundred dollars a year, but it was just what put me over the edge and able to go.

Q: So you had that plus the half?

COON: I had that plus the half-scholarship, plus the board and room.

Q: Wooster is a coed school?

COON: Wooster was coed.

Q: Before we get onto that, I wanted to ask you, did you ever do any school newspaper writing or yearbook writing in high school?

COON: No, I was not on the newspaper. I was an officer in the school church. The school church had an organization, and I was quite active in that. Choir. I was a class officer the last year. And I was in a play my senior year. I think, partly because of the scholarship business, I was mostly focused on working fairly hard on my academics.

Q: Of course. You went away, you say, just about the end of the war. You weren't really too young to have had much of an impact made by the war, were you?

COON: I think it was '44 when I went away.

Q: In '44 you went away. So the war was . . .

COON: Yes, because I graduated in '47, so it was September of '44. I can remember the spring of '45-when Roosevelt died. That's one of my early, vivid memories. Of course I can remember Pearl Harbor day.

Q: Did the fact that one brother was in the Army and the other was a conscientious objector cause much tension in the home?

COON: I think my parents handled it pretty well, respected both positions. It was rather extraordinary because both brothers left within a week of each other in '43. They were at college, so they weren't drafted until then. Yes, it must have been '43, because Pearl Harbor was '41. Paul went in the Army, and Richard was a conscientious objector, CPS.

Q: Which must have taken an awful lot of courage.

COON: Oh, it took an enormous amount of courage. I mean that was not a war where there were any objections. I think I felt some tension, because I enormously admired my brother, but everybody else's brothers were going into the Army or the Navy or the Air Force, and it was always hard to explain.

Q: Sure, and then another brother did go into the Army.

COON: And another brother did go into the Army. Then ultimately Bob went too.

Q: Can you recall any other impact that the war made on you?

COON: I suppose at two levels. One is almost a subliminal level; that the world was very much composed of good guys and bad guys and the bad guys were very, very bad-Germans and Japanese. The Japanese scarcely were even human. Although I cannot call myself terribly politicized, I think that was just part of the atmosphere, and one just absorbed it, even when you were quite young. It was, I think, a pretty black-and-white situation, between good guys and bad guys.

And then it's at a very personal level, in terms of gas rationing, sugar rationing, and all that. Living rather much out of town, it was important that I had to carry my lunch to school. In early elementary school we always came home for lunch; my father would always pick us up and bring us home for dinner in the middle of the day. What a curious idea. We had an hour and a half for lunch, so we'd come home and have dinner and go back to school and get out at 3:30. That, of course, changed in the war with the gas rationing. I had to carry lunch to school.

Q: Was there any Red Cross work done by your mother or your father, or anybody on the personal level? Or donating of blood-that was the big thing in my family.

COON: I don't think so. But Durham wasn't the easy place to do those things. A really very small town. Oh, we had a glorious time going around collecting scrap iron. There were all these great big piles.

Q: What did they do with all those newspapers we used to collect?

COON: Oh, yes. I don't know what they did. We used to collect newspapers and scrap iron.

Q: Well, having gone up to Northfield, did you feel yourself removed from this tense political situation, or was it brought home to you by the teachers? What was the atmosphere at Northfield during the war?

COON: During the war? You know, Northfield wasn't quite part of the world. It was a fairly cloistered atmosphere. I think we had a special chapel when Roosevelt died, or on V-E Day. I'm sure the faculty and the headmistress were very conscious of the war, but it didn't impinge on us a great deal. We couldn't go home for Thanksgiving because of the gas rationing, so we had Thanksgiving at school.

Q: Was your brother living at home all of this time after he came out of the hospital?

COON: He didn't come out of the hospital till December of '45.

Q: And you, all this time, were sending him postcards?

COON: I was sending him postcards. During the summers, I worked, and I think summer jobs were important. I don't know about you, but I learned so much from summer jobs.

Q: What did you do?

COON: Here's where the war did impact, because labor was so scarce you could work at a much earlier age. I think between my freshman and sophomore year in high school I had my first job in the university cafeteria, for about ten days. It was a short period of time. Then between my sophomore and junior years in high school I worked full-time in the university cafeteria that summer.

Q: Hard work?

COON: Yes. I mean we had to get down there at 6:30 or something like that in the morning, work the breakfast shift, and then you had a little time off, and then you worked lunch, and then you had a couple of hours off in the afternoon, and then you did dinner.

Q: Good heavens. Was that six days a week? I suppose it was open every day, wasn't it?

COON: Yes, I think so.

Q: For summer school. They went right around the year, didn't they, during the war.

COON: We had at least one day off a week. I'm not sure we had more than one day. I think we earned the princely sum of something like-I started at thirty-five cents an hour-some incredible sum. First check, I bought a watch from Sears Roebuck. [Laughter]

Q: Funny how you remember that. Prized possession, I'm sure.

COON: I think I worked two summers full-time at the cafeteria, which would put it back to between my freshman and sophomore, and my sophomore and junior years, which was pretty early.

Q: That certainly was. That sounds almost illegal, doesn't it?

COON: Well, we had to get work permits.

Q: Because you weren't sixteen.

COON: And then when I was sixteen, I went off to Bethlehem, New Hampshire and worked in a hotel between my junior and senior years.

It was my first, blinding, eye-opening personal exposure to the fact that all men and women weren't treated equal and that there was prejudice in this world. Bethlehem-are you familiar with the history of the hotels there?

Q: I'm not sure I am. You mean the Jewish/non-Jewish business?

COON: That's right.

Q: They had some hotels that were strictly for Jewish people, and others where Jews couldn't even walk in the lobby.

COON: It had gone from a gentile resort for asthmatics, a health resort. I think it was in the late '20s, or maybe even early '30s when, as a result of the Depression, some of the hotels were bought up by Jews. By the time I worked there-it must have been the summer of '45? Most of the hotels were owned and patronized almost entirely by Jews, and there were still two or three hotels that were continuing to discriminate. I was in a transition hotel owned by a very anti-Semitic gentile, who couldn't make a go of it without taking in Jews. So that the clientele, by the time I was there, must have been 40 or 50 percent Jewish, and a certain percentage of gentiles who had been long-time patrons of the hotel, and perhaps 15 percent rich Cubans whom the owner had recruited from somewhere. I haven't a clue why they came.

Q: That's a mixture, isn't it?

COON: It was a very odd mixture, with an entirely gentile staff. And the kitchen crew was almost my first exposure to blacks. Being brought up in a small New Hampshire town, I had scarcely met any Blacks before. The head chef was white but all the other cooks were black, and, as I say, the owner and staff were gentile. The clientele was a strange and wonderful mixture of Jews, Cubans, and gentiles. And it was an eye-opening experience. In protected little Durham, I didn't know much about the big world out there.

Q: Must have shocked you.

COON: It was really both shocking and a tremendous revelation; I think very good for me. Living conditions were terrible. The food for the staff was appallingly bad. The living quarters were awful. It was like one bathroom for twenty waitresses. Wonderful example of exploitation. So it was a revelation in many, many ways. The owner/manager lived with his secretary, but his wife lived in a separate suite in the hotel, and I had never, never, never dreamt such a situation was possible. [Laughter]

Q: You were learning everything, weren't you?

COON: I was learning everything all at once that summer. Gad, in Durham, I don't think I knew a divorced person.

Q: You really had a growing-up there. But exploitation, yes, and I'll bet you didn't tell your mother what it was like.

COON: No, I don't think I reported fully.

Q: You wanted the money, and you put up with it. It's terrible.

COON: That's right. So we survived. I think we got fifty dollars a month plus board and room, which were appallingly bad, and then what you really had to count on were your tips. Tips became very, very important.

Q: Did you find that the Cubans tipped better than the others?

COON: Oh yes, the rich Cubans; they were the best. To get a table of rich Cubans was splendid. Some of the old gentiles-I can still remember a pair of old ladies that I waited on gave me a box of bath powder at the end of two weeks. I was interested in cash. [Laughter]

Q: Of course you were. You weren't doing it for your health, were you? Well, all of these things certainly must have awakened you to the world outside and got you prepared to go off to college.

COON: Then the summer after my senior year, between senior year and freshman year in college, my parents wanted me to come home and spend the summer. So I ended up getting mononucleosis, and spent most of the summer in bed. Then went off to college. I worked a little while in the library, but that was it for the rest of the summer. Between my junior and senior year, I was at home again, and I worked for the horticulture department that summer. My parents again wanted me to come home. Remember the horticultural farm beyond our house? Well, they had a wonderful experiment that required that you measure the girth of the apple trees.

I don't know what the experiment was all about, but in order to measure the girth of the trees accurately, they had to measure it at the same place each year, and in order to do that they had to have a white line painted around the tree. So I spent part of that summer going through the whole orchard of the horticulture department and scraping off the bark with a little scraper and painting a white line around hundreds of apple trees. It was one of the most satisfying jobs I ever had because I could go back years later and see the fruit of my work where the white lines still showed. [Laughter]

Q: I can't see how that fitted in with your subsequent career, but all these things are grist to the mill, aren't they? You had had a lot of exposure to living away from home and to being away from your family, so I suppose going away to Wooster wasn't all that traumatic. Did you have a roommate?

COON: Ohio was, of course, practically Indian country back then. I mean that was a long way.

Q: Where is Wooster?

COON: In central Ohio, between Cleveland and Columbus. Closer to Cleveland than Columbus. My goodness, I can't even remember how I got there. I must have gone by train.

Q: What is Wooster known for? Liberal arts?

COON: It's a small, Presbyterian liberal arts college.

Q: By this time had you thought of a subsequent career?

COON: When I first went to Wooster, I had enjoyed Bible at Northfield so much I was thinking about majoring in religion. Wooster also required you to take at least one religion course, and I took it my freshman year. It was a vast disappointment because it was a less rigorous course than the course I'd already had at Northfield.

Q: I see, so you felt you were wasting your time?.

COON: Yes, and lost interest in that. Q: Sure. So what courses had you mapped out for yourself? Everybody takes the same thing the first year, don't they?

COON: Yes. You try to get as many requirements out of the way, so I think I took English and biology. I got advanced placement in physics, and I think I got advanced placement in math. I must have because I didn't take any math in college.

I can't remember whether it was my first year or my second year that I took my first political science course. It was a standard course in comparative governments. People have subsequently told me that they found the old comparative governments courses perfectly awful. I happened to have a woman professor, who was head of the poli sci department at Wooster, who taught comparative government and could absolutely make it sing. The English parliamentary system was the most exciting thing you'd ever heard of when Mary Z. Johnson taught you the parliamentary system. I was very much turned on by that. I just thought this was fascinating.

Q: Isn't it amazing what a difference a teacher can make?

COON: Yes. I think probably most of us-unless you just have a terribly strong bent like my brother Paul did toward chemistry-move into our careers because of a teacher who turns us on. Then I had a really good history professor. It became apparent that my interests really were moving very much toward history and political science.

Q: Was this history professor a man or a woman?

COON: It was a tenured woman. It was odd because Wooster was a small liberal arts college, and tenured women professors on American faculties in the late forties must have been a minuscule percentage. I think what had happened in these church-related colleges that had had difficult times in the '20s, and particularly in the '30s, is that they found they could hire women cheaper.

Q: You can believe it's economic.

COON: These two women, I discovered long afterward, were hired in the late '20s as instructors with the assumption being, of course, that they would remain instructors. And as time passed, they became associate professors. It was the history professor told me that when the chairmanship opened up, she had the seniority for the job. The dean of the college called her in and said, "I know, of course, you'll step aside." She said, "No, I won't."

Q: Good for her. Did she get away with it?

COON: She got away with it. Apparently they held it in abeyance for a long time, but she just allowed as how-and the dean of the college was apparently absolutely stunned. It didn't occur to him that . . .

Q: She didn't know her place.

COON: Exactly. So in any event, by the time I got to Wooster, the head of the political science department was a woman, one of those women who were hired cheap in the '20s or '30s, and the history department was headed by a woman. Both very strong personalities, and the two departments were well-staffed and had the largest numbers of majors.

Again, the term "role model" didn't exist, but as I look back on it, I think probably without a doubt the fact that those two women were in senior positions made a lot of difference. They were not very productive scholars at that stage in their careers, but they were great teachers in both cases.

Q: It's a nice distinction. They'd lose their jobs now, wouldn't they?

COON: No, they'd keep their job if they were already tenured. I think they had done enough research in their early days so they had a list of their publications when they were tenured.

Q: Did you think of going into academia yourself?

COON: I didn't want to because my whole family was in academia. The safe route when I was in college was elementary education if you were a woman. If you had any sense at all, you majored in something and then minored in elementary ed. You could always get a job and that was kind of your destiny. Education courses were just awful. I mean they were intellectually insulting.

For some reason, although I was not in a position to take many risks economically, I just flatly refused. I played with the idea of taking the insurance policy of elementary ed but I finally just flatly refused, and I'm so glad I did. But then the choice came at the end of the sophomore year as to what I was going to major in. I couldn't make up my mind and ended up majoring in both history and political science. Did a double major, with my senior thesis being in political science.

Q: What was that about?

COON: A comparative study of British and American trade unions in politics. I'd hate to reread it. [Laughter]

Q: Sounds like a fascinating field, actually. Did you take much economics?

COON: No, I wish I'd taken more. I took only one semester of economics, and it was classical supply-and-demand curves. It seemed to me to have no applicability to the real world. Again, a lousy professor, and it's a shame, because I think any Foreign Service Officer ought to have a very heavy dose of economics.

Q: You, at this time, had not yet thought at all about moving over into diplomacy?

COON: I didn't know the Foreign Service existed.

Q: What did you think you were going to do with all this book learning?

COON: I guess I probably didn't worry about it too acutely until I got to my senior year, and then there was the awful specter of graduate school. I didn't really want to teach. I didn't really want to go into academics because my family was all in academia. I wanted to do something different.

And one of these two professors-I think it was Miss Johnson, the political science professor-suggested I take something called the JMA examination, which was an examination given by the federal government for junior professional appointees to the Civil Service. I took that as sort of a flyer, not having any idea what it was all about. Actually, to get through the written and the oral examination in those very early '50s, it turned out to be more selective than the Foreign Service examination. There was a very small number of people that got through both the written and the oral.

To my astonishment, I passed it. By that time I was oriented more toward the international scene. I had focused on European history rather than American history. I took international law instead of constitutional law, which when I look back, I think was probably a mistake. I was interested in the world out there. One summer I went to France to a World Council of Churches work camp, at a Protestant college in south central France. This must have been '49. It must have been after my freshman year. I took a crash course in French that year. It was absolutely a shoestring operation. We had to pay our transatlantic tourist class fare, and the cheapest way to get there at that time was the tourist class on the Queen Elizabeth or the Queen Mary. We went on the Queen Elizabeth and came back on the Queen Mary. Then we paid a dollar a day at work camp in this French college. It was pretty soon after the war. There was still a lot of war damage.

Q: Where did you say this was?

COON: It was in the Massif Central area of south central France. A place called the College Cevenol.

Q: How long did you stay there? Six weeks maybe?

COON: Something like that. We traveled for a couple of weeks beforehand, and then we spent about six weeks in the camp.

Q: It must have done wonders for your French.

COON: I guess it helped my French, yes. It was just a wildly exciting summer, because I assumed that this was the only time that I would ever get outside of the United States. Certainly that I'd ever get to Europe. I didn't know a great many people that had gone to Europe. The big thing in Durham was to get to the West Coast.

Q: Even New York.

COON: Yes. So going to Europe was the event of a lifetime. In fact, I was just up in New York last weekend, and I was recalling my departure for France. I was monumentally unsophisticated. The group I was traveling with-there were about ten or a dozen of us-met in New York for a day's orientation. The project leader told us during orientation that our most precious document was our passport and to take care of it.

Well, I certainly took instructions very seriously, and I buried my passport in the bottom of my suitcase where nobody could find it. Then we got down to the wharf, and of course our suitcases were put on board ship. [Laughter] Here was the giant Queen Elizabeth, and there I was, at Immigration, with the Immigration officer saying, "Your passport is where?" They had already taken the tourist class luggage up in those great nets, and dumped it in huge mounds on the deck before distributing it to the cabins. They had to send word out, and an army of stewards began to paw through the luggage to find my suitcase and bring it down. I opened it up, found the passport, and I was the last passenger on board, I think, with the hue of a cherry. This poor fellow who had handled our orientation in New York stood there, shaking his head. He'd seen it all-[Hearty laughter].

Q: Oh, that's a lovely story. So many hundreds of people. I can just see these stacks of trunks and suitcases.

COON: A mountain of them, and they had to find my one poor little Sears Roebuck suitcase.

Q: Never mind. You learned from that.

COON: One learns. But that was an exciting summer. Little did I know that I would be spending the bulk of my adult life overseas.

Q: I should say. Guarding your passport. Well, we've got you so that you have passed this exam, and then . . .

COON: Okay. There were various departments of government that offered intern programs, and the State Department was the one I became interested in, and I applied and was accepted. I was very fortunate because it was a group of about eighteen, I guess. I moved to Washington, which was the first time I'd ever lived in a city.

Q: Where did you live?

COON: I first lived with a couple of girls out on New Hampshire Avenue, and then moved in with a gal I met in the office. We lived up on Wisconsin Avenue, shared an apartment. And I began working in the State Department.

Q: So was this 1950?

COON: '51. September of '51.

Q: September. So you're right out of college.

COON: Fresh out of college and green as grass.

Q: You'd already been to Europe; don't forget that.

COON: I'd already been to Europe. [Laughter] But, I was green.

Q: It must have been exciting all the same, to be in a big city.

COON: Oh, it was-but the best part about it was the paycheck.

Q: What sort of sums did they pay back then? I know it wasn't too princely.

COON: I don't remember exactly, but I think it was thirty-four hundred a year. GS-5.

Q: Did you take the Foreign Service exam?

COON: I was going to take the Foreign Service exam, and then the Wriston program started, so I joined by that route. By that time I was a GS-9 and it made more sense.

Q: You had to be a certain level before you could be integrated? Or am I remembering incorrectly?

COON: If I had still been a GS-5, it would have made sense to take the examination and go in, but I was a GS-9 by that time, so it made sense that I could get one leg up.

Q: What did this translate into, an FS what?

COON: You know they changed this so many times. I think it was five (FSR-5).

Q: In 1956 they reclassified grade levels and added grades 7 and 8.

COON: That's right. Because then I went back a class (to FSR-6, later changed to FSO-6).

Q: What was your first job description? What did you do?

COON: The intern program was a great program. We had about two weeks' orientation and got a sense of being a class. Then over a nine-month period we were allowed to work in three different areas of our choice. Since our positions were training positions, it meant that you didn't encumber a position in an office where we wanted to work. We took our position with us. So you could pretty much write your own ticket. I didn't know enough about the Department to do it very intelligently, now that I look back on it.

I was curious about other parts of the world than Western Europe. By that time I'd had quite a lot of Western European history in college, but Wooster offered nothing on any other part of the world. I looked at this great map of the world, and I realized there were just continents about which I knew nothing. So I decided to try Africa, and my first job was related to African affairs. Then I decided I'd try South Asia, so my second three months I spent on South Asia. Then my third three months I spent on U.N. trusteeship affairs, when trusteeships were still a big item.

Q: Did you actually do any substantive work, or was it just make-work?

COON: Heavens, I don't think I contributed monumentally to the offices, but yes, they gave you little jobs to do. I remember writing the American position paper for the trusteeship council on the Cameroon, and another one on Rwanda-Burundi. I remember less about what I did on Africa and South Asia. Anyway, you're convinced your assignments are of earth-shaking importance.

I had a very sobering experience, in that first office I was in. They had a really first-class competent secretary who worked for the office director. Really very, very good. Those were the days when secretaries got coffee. That's no longer true. The office was crashing on something considered terribly important. It was a crisis. The director came out, cast his eye around the office, looked at the secretary, and looked at me, and said, "Jane, will you get some coffee."

I never took it that it was because I was a woman. It was a humbling experience. In terms of what the office needed, the secretary was doing something more important than I was. That was very good for me.

I decided I wasn't going to be making foreign policy right away. But the intern program gave me an introduction. Gosh, when I think of how the world has changed: in the trusteeships office, my boss at that time had written a very good paper which hinted that some of the countries of Africa, including North Africa, might gain their independence within the next twenty-five years. He could not clear the paper.

Q: In 1951? I should say not.

COON: This was 1952. The paper was unclearable. EUR would not contemplate the notion of decolonization at that point.

Q: And it moved so quickly.

COON: I literally think his time frame was twenty-five years, and, of course, within five years Morocco and I think Tunisia, and within less than ten years most of black Africa was independent. It was incredible.

Q: It didn't pay to be a prophet in those days.

COON: It sure didn't. The colonies were part of EUR. Certainly Algeria and North Africa were part of EUR. The notion that Algeria could be independent! It was a department of France! They'd just look at you as if you didn't understand geography. "But it's a department of France." Algeria was part of the metropole. It was as if you were talking about New York state hiving off. That was reality.

Q: Yet even at that time there had already been incidents there.

COON: After that first year, then we had to get ourselves a job. The summer of '52 was not a very good summer to get a job, but I managed to land one in South Asia. That was when USIS was still part of the Department. It was what was essentially the area office for South Asia for USIS. I spent a year there, but it was a terrible year because it was during the height of the McCarthy period. You felt that right down to my level. There were people losing their jobs. USIA was splitting off from the Department. There were RIFs [reductions in force] in the Department. It was my first and only real experience with a real RIF, that summer of '53, I think.

Q: That was a heavy one.

COON: Yes. Positions were being abolished left, right, and center. It was really a terrible period.

Q: Yes. I don't know whether you felt that, but if you had not had a service record, you were particularly vulnerable, weren't you?

COON: Coming in on the intern program made the difference. Remember almost everybody in the civil service was "temporary indefinite?"

Q: Yes.

COON: Coming in on the intern program, for some reason we were permanent.

Q: I see.

COON: I had achieved the lofty station of a GS-7, and I was going to bumped back to a GS-5, but I couldn't be RIFed.

Q: Yes, that makes sense. Personnel was divided into four categories. I do recall that.

COON: There was something called a "temporary indefinite." The assumption was that the government, which expanded during the war, was going to go back to the 1930s or 1920s size, I guess. So that everybody that was hired during and after the war was a "temporary indefinite." I think that was the term. Having come in under this intern program, we had permanent status.

So when the office I was in was being abolished, I eventually moved out with the file cabinets. Very demoralizing.

Q: You say you were still a GS at this point? You had not yet gone over?

COON: That's right. So I had to find myself a job, in effect. I began looking for jobs outside the Department, but eventually I found a job in the South Asia section of INR, and managed to keep my GS-7 in the process, which was very fortunate. That was a very lucky break, because I started working for a woman, Ruth Benedict, doing-

Q: Not the anthropologist?

COON: No, not the anthropologist. This Ruth Benedict had been a newspaper woman and had come in to OWI during the war. She was a splendid editor, and I look back on that as a very useful period. I would produce my drafts on yellow pads. She edited them with a red pen or pencil. I would get them back, and wonder if she had cut both wrists over them. [Hearty laughter] It was a very useful experience for me. She was a very tough, very constructive editor. It was a very useful experience.

Q: Indeed. You had not gone into newspaper work at all in college either?

COON: No. I'm sure it would have been very helpful, and I had to get it during this period.

Q: Aren't you lucky you found somebody to help you that early in your career?

COON: Absolutely.

Q: Because the ability to write is absolutely crucial.

COON: Absolutely. Absolutely crucial. Like everybody else, I thought I could write, but I could produce a great passive verb.

(February 6, 1987. Continuation of interview with Ambassador Jane Coon, at her home in Washington, DC)

Q: You were telling me last time about working in INR, and you were there for two years?

COON: No, longer than that. I was there really from probably the end of '53 to '57. Three and a half years, I guess.

Q: I see. What was your particular area of responsibility?

COON: Initially I was covering all of the NEA area.

Q: That's when Bob Baum was in charge of . . .

COON: That's right. Africa. Yes. And Charlton Ogburn was in charge of the Near East-South Asia Division. The job was USIA-related, in terms of collection and analysis of mostly public opinion-type things. After a year or so on that, I became the Pakistan-Afghanistan analyst.

Q: You went into that area of the world very soon in your career, didn't you?

COON: Yes, South Asia, really from very early.

Q: What were you doing? Research papers?

COON: I was doing long, detailed chapters for something called the "National Intelligence Studies," I think it was, NIS. They were studies that were being done at that time by INR worldwide. Fearfully accurate, carefully edited, and unbelievably dull.

Q: Who was to read these? For what market?

COON: I'm not that sure if anyone ever read them. They were supposedly background material for people to read.

Q: Did you travel in connection with this?

COON: I never traveled to South Asia in connection with that. But in addition to the NIS's, I was also doing more current intelligence. The junior officers took shifts coming in early in the morning and going through the telegraphic and other material that came in [overnight] so we could brief, I guess, the head of INR, who then went to the Secretary's staff meeting, or a senior staff meeting. You'd have to come in about six a.m., I guess, 5:30 or six, every three weeks.

Q: Did you have any problems connected with being a woman and having to come in at odd times? Were you held back in any way because you were a woman, do you think?

COON: I don't really recall that I was. There were several women in the office, including the senior editor for the division, from whom I learned a great deal about both analysis and some writing.

Q: Is that the Benedict you talked about?

COON: No, this was Helen Kitchen, who later became quite a senior person on Africa; not in the Department, outside. Then in about 1955, about the time I'd decided that I would take the Foreign Service exam, the Wriston thing came along.

Q: What did you have to do to take advantage of that particular thing? You didn't have to take the written exam?

COON: No, you didn't have to take an examination. It was a kind of an integration of the Civil Service and the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you have oral exams?

COON: I don't think so. No.

Q: It was just plain integration. It wasn't the same then, for people who were FSS's, becoming FSOs?

COON: No.

Q: Got a lot of good people that way, Carol Laise, among others.

COON: That's right. So I came in about '55 or '56 and stayed in INR, working by that time pretty much full-time on Pakistan, because I moved into the job of a man who went out to Karachi-which was then the capital-as the junior officer in the political section. I rather had my eye on succeeding him in his job in Karachi as my first overseas assignment, because I already realized that I wanted to do political work, and it was not going to be easy to get an overseas political job.

Q: At any time in these early days, did you have any interviews with people in personnel? Did you have any of them ask you if you were going to leave to be married, and that sort of thing?

COON: I don't remember anything like that. It may have happened, but I don't remember it. What I'm really conscious of now, probably as a result of the feminist movement, was that, back in the '50s, you accepted the fact that you were a woman and therefore it was going to be more difficult to compete. I didn't particularly get upset by it. It was just part of the environment.

Q: It's just the way life was.

COON: That's the way it was, and I hate to say I accepted it, but I didn't have any tremendous sense of injustice. I didn't have any great sense of anger over discrimination. It was just the way things were.

Q: We didn't know it could be any other way.

COON: In later years, talking it over, for example, with my husband: every male officer in his A-100, his junior officer class, came in with a fixed notion that they were going to shoot for the top, that becoming an ambassador was the name of the game.

Q: Sure. Political cone.

COON: Particularly political cone. We didn't have cones in those days.

Q: No, that's true.

COON: I don't literally ever remember during my first period in the Foreign Service, my first sixteen years, ever dreaming that that could be possible. I did not aspire to it because it was not one of those things one aspired to. I'm not even sure I ever thought it would be possible to become a political counselor, because that implied supervising men, and women didn't supervise men very often in those days. It was not a common thing. There were certainly women in the Department who did, but it was not an expectation. For a young male officer at that time, there was an expectation of rising up that wonderful ladder. I realize, looking back on it, I really did not see that as a goal. I thought I would work on each successive assignment. I loved the work, I loved the Foreign Service, but it never occurred to me that I would ever be able. . .

Q: Did you assume that you would marry, and leave the service? Or were you just accepting things as they came along?

COON: I think probably I operated at two levels. There was always an expectation there that there was a possibility of marrying and leaving the service, but I think there was also an equal expectation that this was a great and wonderful way to make a living. So probably both things operated at the same time. I think that young women now who come into the service find this absolutely inexplicable.

Q: I know. I know. And you find yourself defending yourself, perhaps?

COON: Sometimes I find it inexplicable, too.

Q: That's what consciousness raising is all about.

COON: So anyway, I worked hard on Pakistan, and, as the INR analyst, I learned a lot, and the time came to go out overseas. My predecessor's time was coming to an end in Karachi. I don't remember exactly what I did. There was no bid system in those days. But I worked to get myself in line as the candidate to succeed him in Karachi, and it seemed to be working. It was a logical, onward assignment for me. It was logical for the embassy in Karachi to take someone who knew something about Pakistan.

Q: Did you have to take the A-100 course?

COON: No. And I suppose that probably Karachi wasn't considered a plum by many, when you get right down to it. [Laughter]

Q: I was just thinking how brave you were to go out to Karachi.

COON: I thought it was the place I really wanted to go, because I knew I could break in there. Again, I don't think there was a paneling system, but I got up to the assignment process, and I was assigned, when the word came back that neither the ambassador nor the DCM nor the political counselor felt that it was a reasonable assignment. A woman could not do substantive work in Pakistan.

Well, the prospects didn't look very good. I still don't know quite what happened. The assignment went up, apparently, all the way to the assistant secretary, who, to me at that time, was about two steps away from God. I mean he was so high that I'd never met him. I don't even remember who it was, to this day. Apparently, the Pakistan desk officer must have recommended me, and he made the decision that I would go.

But I went out with some trepidation, knowing that I wasn't wholly welcome in my new post of assignment. [Laughter]

Q: Yes, of course. Now you went out as a second secretary.

COON: I went out as a second secretary. Q: So you arrived. How did you get to Pakistan in 1957?

COON: I was living in a furnished house with three other women down on Tunlaw Road, and had no furniture, no glassware and cutlery, or anything like that, so I went out and bought twelve place settings of seconds at the China Closet, and some stainless steel. Got together, to the best of my ability, a wardrobe. Went through the travel process in the Department-in those days there were a couple of women who handled overseas travel. This was before CATO. Do you remember Becky Sanford? They were fairly fearsome for junior officers to cope with when you got ready to go out to your post. I think that's a substantial understatement.

There were, of course, prop planes at those times, and I asked to stop over in Beirut for three or four days and visit a friend. I had to get written authorization to take leave, even in Beirut, from my desk officer, because Mrs. Sanford felt that one went directly to one's post.

So the day before I was leaving Washington, I triumphantly went and picked up my tickets, and I brought them home. I'd never had anything as thick as an international airline ticket, so I thumbed through them and discovered that I had tickets from San Francisco to Sydney, and from Beirut to Karachi. [Laughter]So I hustled back into the Department the next day, and Mrs. Sanford fairly melted the phone at the other end in the Pan Am office. I got my tickets. But it was a wonder I didn't get on the plane without checking my tickets. I mean, you assume that your tickets are in good order.

So anyway, I took off, went to Beirut, spent a couple of days, went on to Karachi, and I can still remember flying over what seemed to me endless desert. This was in mid-May 1957.taken Endless, endless desert, and finally somebody pointing out this small patch of white city on the edge of the sea and saying that was Karachi, surrounded by what looked to me like howling desert. Thinking to myself, as my heart dropped, that I was going to spend the next two years of my life here.

Then when we landed it must have been about a hundred and fifteen. It was like walking into an oven. But I was picked up and spent the first ten days, I guess, with the political counselor and his wife, who were a very delightful couple. And then moved into a flat which I shared with the assistant personnel officer.

Q: Were these embassy quarters?

COON: Embassy-leased housing. It was the upstairs of a house with the distinguished address of Number One Special Drigh Road. It was neither number one nor was it special.

Q: Does that mean something in Karachi, to call things special?

COON: Well, in this particular housing colony, they had numbered the houses by date of construction, not by their position on the street, and this had been the first house built. It rather complicated finding people. [Hearty laughter]

Q: It must have been awful. You'd have to have little maps.

COON: You had to have maps. Number twenty-four might be next to number forty-seven, and number one might be next to thirty-three.

Then I promptly came down with typhoid. Paratyphoid. And was hospitalized in the Seventh Day Adventist hospital for a week, where I learned that Seventh Day Adventists sing hymns on Saturday and are vegetarians.

Q: You hadn't known those things?

COON: I don't think I'd known all of that. And then recuperated at home, and really started work after that. There was, of course, no training for political officers at that time in terms of what you did as a political officer, so it was a pretty much sink-or-swim. My boss was the political counselor and there were also two first secretaries and a second secretary in the section. One of the two first secretaries was extremely helpful in breaking me in and introducing me.

Q: How did you happen to get this disease, if you don't mind my going back a bit?

COON: Oh, paratyphoid? I think I got it, actually, because the political counselor and his wife were having plumbing problems, and the sewage system was dug up in the vicinity of the house, and I think probably it got into the water.

Q: But you hadn't had an inoculation?

COON: I'd had a shot, but typhoid shots are only about 70 percent effective.

Q: I see. I'm glad I didn't know that all these years.

COON: No, they're not a sure thing. They may be better now, but not at that time. I was surprised too, because I just had a shot before I went out.

Q: So what were your first jobs? What were the first things you did?

COON: I suppose the first things young political officers do are biographic reporting, descriptive reporting and a certain amount of answering letters, a lot of just getting around and making contacts and getting to know people and trying to understand the local scene. I was there about six months when-I guess it was in November-the Consul General in Dhaka asked that someone be sent over on TDY because his only political officer was leaving, and there was going to be a gap of about a month. Being the most junior and quite clearly the least productive member of the section at that point, they sent me off to Dhaka for three weeks. And that was very interesting. That was a lot of fun.

Q: Did they give you any special training before you went?

COON: No.

Q: What about language training?

COON: No.

Q: That must have been a bit of a poser, wasn't it?

COON: English is pretty widely spoken in Pakistan.

Q: What about entertaining? Did you begin to entertain? Did you have an allowance as a second secretary?

COON: I don't remember whether I had an allowance. I did begin to entertain, yes.

Q: What did you do in those three weeks when you were in Dhaka?

COON: I filled in as political officer. I made a lot of calls mostly by cycle rickshaw. It was really almost an orientation to me to the eastern wing of the country. Very, very useful, and of course it turned out to be of enormous use many years later, that I could say I'd been there in 1957. I remember I was in Dhaka when Sputnik went up.

Q: Oh, is that so?

COON: Yes, I remember that. I went down and visited Chittagong. I stayed with the only other European woman in Chittagong, a WHO nurse. I badly wanted to visit an American dam project up the Karnaphuli River that was just beginning construction, so I arranged to call on the construction company headquarters in Chittagong. I walked into this big, sort of recreation hall. There was an enormous table, just covered from one end to the other with hors d'oeuvres. I thought, "My stars, they're having a party," because there were six or eight engineers there. It took me quite a little while to discover that it was all for me. [Laughter] There were almost no Western women who visited Chittagong, and to have one in town was an event.

They arranged the next day to send me up river on a Bengali launch that was taking some materials for the dam. That was a wonderful trip up the Karnaphuli River. I was met at the other end at the dam site and spent the night up there. They had just begun construction of the housing for the engineers and for the labor, and were just beginning the construction of the dam.

Of course many years later I went back, in 1981. The dam had been intended to have two generators, and I went back for the opening of the third generator, which was a big event.

Q: Did you experience culture shock?

COON: I can't remember that I did. I was so curious and so excited about being at my first overseas post that I just plunged in and thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the country and the people. I felt, after I'd been there a couple of years, that, as a woman, despite the resistance to my coming there, I had really in many ways a distinct advantage. I was in some ways a third sex as far as the Pakistanis were concerned. Their social mores really didn't apply to me, their expectations of me as a woman. But at the same time I was a woman, and I could get into Pakistani families, which was virtually impossible for a man, so that I made a lot of really very good friend in several families.

I also had something of an advantage in terms of getting to know the very tiny handful of Pakistani professional women that existed then. In fact there were about four of them, and we used to have lunch together about once a month, and I learned an enormous amount about their problems as professional women in that society.

And I learned a lot about the culture. I can still remember one lunch when one of the women-she must have been in her early '30s and had her doctorate from the University of Minnesota-came in and rather, almost blushingly, which was not her style, announced that she was being married. The instant reaction of all of the other women at the table was, "Have you met him?" Which indeed she had.

Q: She was a very forward woman, wasn't she, to have met her fiancï¿½.

COON: She did not know him well, but she had met him. The family had almost despaired of her getting married because she was so years old.

Q: You mean she was in her '20s or something?

COON: I think she may have been as much as thirty.

Q: I see. She was really long in the tooth.

COON: May have been only in her late '20s, I'm not sure, but she was long in the tooth.

I think I just learned probably more at that post than any post about the society and how it worked and how families functioned. And despite the fact that women were in purdah, there were frequently very strong women in various families who wielded a great deal of power in family decision making, and family decision making is important in that part of the world. They were the ones for the most part that arranged the marriages, and they had an awful lot to do with issues of inheritance and issues of land and property, although technically the power was in the hands of the men.

Q: Did they also hold the family purse strings? Or I should say, disburse the family money?

COON: I don't know. To some extent I think they did. I did a lot of traveling in Pakistan. I traveled quite extensively in the province of Sindh, which was the southern province of Pakistan, of which Karachi, I believe, was the capital at that time. I went up to Punjab, to Lahore a couple of times, to cover when the political officer there left. I went to Peshawar alone and made my calls on people in Peshawar. It was before we had a consulate or any representation there, and I made all of my calls in the backs of tongas, these wonderful two-wheeled horse carts. Visited Swat.

Q: What is that?

COON: Swat. It's a small area. Babe Ruth was called the Sultan of Swat.

Q: Yes. And there really is a Sultan of Swat! Swat was really a small princely state north of Peshawar.

COON: That's right. So after two years in Karachi, I applied for Hindi language training, on the grounds that if I got language training, it would be much more difficult for the Department to consign me to other than political work. I did nine months at the Foreign Service Institute in '59-'60 on Hindi, and was assigned to Bombay, not strictly speaking a Hindi language post, but the consular district included Madhya Pradesh, which was a Hindi language area.

The first year I was going to be consular officer, and then I would pick up from the political officer and replace him.

Q: In your first assignment, did you feel you were treated like a talking horse or something, as this very unusual person, a woman and a Foreign Service officer?

COON: You mean by the Pakistanis or the Americans?

Q: Both. Did the Americans accept you as a colleague? The American men?

COON: I think so.

Q: Or did they treat you like the little sister? I mean, the sort of treatment you got at home.

COON: I suppose there was a little bit of the little sister, but no, I think I was accepted pretty well once I'd established that I could get around, that I wasn't afraid of getting out. In fact, I just loved getting out and was enormously curious. I just enjoyed myself enormously.

Q: Yes, and that enthusiasm carried over, of course.

COON: Yes. There was also a young group of diplomats in Karachi, single, mostly men, a couple of Turks, and a British officer, a Belgian, and a couple of Americans; myself, and one or two of the secretaries from the embassy. We had a great time, socially, as a small group.

Q: You were the only woman in this group?

COON: I was the only, at least, woman professional in the group. We had a wonderful time. We'd go out to the beach huts at a place called Hawks Bay, just outside of Karachi, and engage in camel races where you could rent a camel. As a group we'd rent what was known as a bunder boat in the harbor, the fishing boats, and go out for parties. It was a very pleasant sort of social life as well as a lot of fun professionally.

Q: Hardship post?

COON: It was a hardship post, yes. Supposedly a hardship post but I didn't find it much of a hardship.

Q: How did you arrange for entertaining? You had a flat-mate you said. Did you work out a schedule with her?

COON: She didn't do much entertaining outside of the American community, and she did play bridge, and we worked out a schedule, so that didn't seem to be a problem.

I suspect they would not have put a young male political officer into a flat where he had to share with another. In fact, later, a colleague came out who was a single officer in the political section, and he had his own house. I'm quite sure that he would never have been expected to share a house. But I didn't particularly fuss about this because I didn't have enough dishes and cutlery and what-all to really handle very much entertainment on my own.

Q: Was this an instance of "taking care" of a woman?

COON: No. I don't think for a moment it was an instance of taking care of a woman. I thought they were solving a housing problem, and they could put two women together without getting a squawk. And I didn't squawk because it turned out-

Q: You didn't have enough cutlery. [Laughter]

COON: I didn't have enough cutlery to handle more than twelve people. And after I'd had typhoid it was nice to be in a place with somebody else. That's a very depressing disease. I look back on Karachi as just an awful lot of fun and a place where I learned a lot.

Anyway I went on to Hindi training and got ready to go out to Bombay as consular officer. My assignment was made in January, and I wasn't going out until the following summer. I was told not to communicate with the post, because the consul general, who was retiring in June, was unalterably opposed to women in the Foreign Service. He was very much old school. And Personnel said that it would be unwise to communicate with the post until absolutely the last minute before he was leaving.

So it was finally communicated. I guess by that time I'd finished Hindi language, was taking the consular course, and I went to a party to meet my new consul general, who was going out to replace this gentleman.

My new consul general-I can still remember the party-said, "Oh, I'm so glad to meet you, Jane. I guess I really ought to tell you what I've been doing today. I had a letter from my predecessor, a long letter, three pages, explaining all of the reasons why a woman could not do consular work in Bombay, so I have been going through the Department today to see if I could break your assignment."

So far he was unsuccessful. But this was literally days before I was supposed to leave for the post. He wasn't in a position to make a judgment himself, and he accepted the judgment of his predecessor that a woman couldn't do consular work. When I think of how many women are in consular work, now. [Laughter]

Q: I know, I know. That's where they're supposed to be naturals.

COON: Fortunately, he was unsuccessful. I went out, but I went out again with that wonderful feeling that my boss thought I shouldn't be there. He had been a long-time economic cone officer, knew nothing about consular work, and it was a one-person consular section, so I was on my own.

It turned out to be really a piece of cake. I mean it was hard learning the job in terms of a one-person operation, but there was no problem in being a woman. In fact, again, it turned out in some respects to be an asset.

What the old consul general had particularly emphasized that it would be impossible for a woman to handle, was shipping and seamen.

Q: Same old story. They use that in any part of the world.

COON: Same old story. Yes. In fact it was probably easier for a woman to handle shipping and seamen than any other part of consular work. I very quickly discovered that most seamen had been raised at the knees of a strict mother, who had beaten into his head that you don't swear in front of ladies.

They'd come into my office, and I had arranged it so there wasn't a handy chair to sit in, so they would stand. They would start complaining about food on the ship, or working conditions. They'd say, "Ma'am, that go-uh. That da-uh. That-the captain is serving us absolute sh-ma'am the food isn't good." [Hearty laughter] It would only take them five minutes before they were so absolutely paralyzed by their inability to communicate that it generally solved the problem. The captains were, in many cases, equally docile.

I found that jail visits and that kind of thing were no problem. The Indians were extremely helpful. Usually an American sailor in jail was appreciative of anything you could do, like getting him put on a non-veg diet schedule, rather than a veg diet, and arrange to have some food sent in. So that it didn't turn out to be, again, at all a problem. In fact, as I say, it was probably an advantage being a woman.

I wouldn't trade that consular tour for anything because I think you learn as much as a consular officer as you do in any other job in the service. You learn an awful lot about people.

Q: Yes, I imagine you must. Is it monotonous work?

COON: No. It wasn't monotonous then. By present day standards Bombay would have been a very low volume visa post, so you could spend quite a lot of time on each case. There was a mix of protection and welfare. You know, the odd American who died or was hospitalized. Shipping and seamen. It was before the hippie phenomenon, but you had this wonderful phenomenon of world travelers at that time, who were traveling from England to Australia. Americans going from England to Australia. They were usually very interesting, if a trifle off-beat. If I found one interesting enough I'd have him or her home for lunch. So you met a lot of interesting people.

I traveled in the consular district, mostly by train up through Madhya Pradesh. Made one two-week trip up through central India. Again, I was certainly the first woman consular officer anybody had seen. I was calling on Indian officials and visiting mostly missionaries.

Then the second year I moved into the political position, and I spent the next three years as political officer in Bombay.

Q: What was your housing there?

COON: That's another slight incident. I initially was put into an apartment, a government-leased apartment in an Indian apartment building where we had several flats. Very pleasant, overlooking the Arabian sea. But that was temporary, and I was going to be moved from Jivanjyot into Washington House, a US Government owned building.Then the very energetic, rather aggressive PAO, who was protecting some USIS apartments, worked out an arrangement where, in the course of the year I would be moved six times.

The consul general called me in to tell me about this arrangement, which again, I'm perfectly certain would never have entered their heads with a male officer. At that point I put my foot down, and I said that was just an impossible situation because I needed to have my own apartment. If you're going to build up contacts, you can't move every two weeks.

Q: Plus the amount of time it takes.

COON: Plus just the amount of time it takes to move. So I think I did two moves. I moved into a one-bedroom, and then ultimately got a two-bedroom apartment, my second year. That made me mad. By that time I guess I was beginning to get mad. Which we all should have done sooner.

Q: I think you were very forbearing if it took till then to get mad. [Laughter]

COON: You just took this state of affairs for granted, as the way the world was constructed.

Q: Your needs were just not important.

COON: No.

Q: Although, of course, you had a very important assignment.

COON: So as political officer in Bombay, I think probably that's the post where I made what reputation I got as a political officer. I traveled widely in the consular district. It was a period of substantial change in western Indian politics, and I made a breakthrough in terms of getting to know the chief minister of Maharashtra, whom no Westerner had gotten to know up until that time. He was very much of a product of middle caste Maratha culture.

It turned out, as luck would have it, the first year I was political officer there, the Indians took over Goa. The "invasion" is one term used; the Indians use the term "liberation of Goa."

Q: Depends where you're standing.

COON: Depends where you're standing. In 1962, at almost the same time as the Cuban missile crisis, the Sino-Indian War occurred. As a result of the invasion of Goa, Krishna Menon had been elected to parliament from Bombay. As a result of the Sino-Indian War, Krishna Menon, who had become Defense Minister, was eased aside. To everyone's astonishment, the chief minister from Maharashtra was brought up to Delhi to be Defense Minister. This was of course, an extremely crucial time in our relations, and I was the only person who knew him.

Q: He'd been one of your contacts?

COON: Yes. I had worked very hard on trying to get to know him and also to size him up and assess his views.

Q: That was a coup for you. The sort of thing young political officers dream about.

COON: That's right. That was a real break. After he was defense minister, I'd only see him when he came back to Bombay. Again, I got to know a lot of Indians, made a lot of Indian friends. I can't think of any difficulties I had with Indians on the account of being a woman. It just didn't seem to be an issue.

Q: There seem to be a great many very important Indian women. Was that true even back then?

COON: There had been Indian women who'd been very active in the independence movement and in the Congress party, and there were a fair number of Indian professional women in a number of walks of life. So it was, I think perhaps, a little more open than-

Q: Than Karachi?

COON: Yes. I had a great consular district that involved Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra and Goa.

Q: So your consular work really fed right into your political work, didn't it?

COON: Yes. One other interesting aspect: I guess being a woman was an oddity-and I didn't quite realize what an oddity it was until about 1963. My mother and father came out to visit, traveling on one of the last Anchor Line ships through the Suez Canal, and landed in Bombay and spent about three months with me.

They arrived before Christmas, and my Indian friends were just absolutely delighted to have my parents there. It somehow made me human to have family, to actually be born of woman, so to speak. I realized that it humanized me.

Q: You weren't sprung from the head of Zeus.

COON: Exactly. [Laughter] They just fell all over themselves giving my parents Christmas presents and inviting them out for dinner. My parents, I think, were really quite overcome by the amount of attention they got. But it was clear my Indian friends were just delighted to find that I indeed was human like the rest of them.

Q: Yes, yes. Isn't that fun.

COON: Bombay was my only four-year tour. I think your first tour is special and your longest tour is special, because you get to know a place so much better.

I was transferred to Delhi in 1965. The political counselor who'd gotten to know me and my work in Bombay asked me if I would come to Delhi at that point. Which I did, and I spent two years as first secretary in Delhi. There we didn't have a political and economic section. We had an external section and an internal section. I was in the external section following Indo-Pak and Indo-Nepalese affairs among others. So I traveled several times to Nepal. It was also during this period that, very early in that tour, there was a very bad downturn in Indo-Pak relations over the Rann of Kutch affair. I remember being over at the British embassy with my British counterpart, and the two of us down on the floor with a whole lot of maps, looking at the Rann of Kutch, when the British ambassador walked in, and the two of us sort of leaping to our feet. [Laughter]

Q: Now all this time had you been getting promotions consistently?

COON: Yes, I got two promotions, really, out of Bombay. I was promoted, I think it was after my consular tour, and then I was promoted when I first got to Delhi, which was really based on my Bombay work.

Q: So this would make you about a three now, would it? As first secretary, you'd be a three.

COON: Yes. I was a three.

Q: The old three.

COON: The old three. I was a young-in age-a young three, because I made three when I was thirty-five or something like that, which in those days was young.

Q: So it certainly didn't hold you back, being a woman, did it? You certainly got them when you should have, and in fact that's very good to go from four to three in less than three years. Very good. By this time, though, you were building up a very good reputation, because we heard about it in another part of the world. So you must have been doing very well.

COON: That was an interesting period in Delhi, because we had the Indo-Pak War, after the Rann of Kutch, that September of '65. Then in the winter of '66 was the Tashkent settlement, engineered by the Russians between India and Pakistan, and the death of the Indian prime minister in Tashkent, of a heart attack. Something which you couldn't possibly write a novel about. It was extraordinary. None of us had expected the Russians to pull off a settlement, and they did, and then Lal Bahadur Shastri died of a heart attack that night.

Q: That same night the settlement came out? My word.

COON: It was a wonderfully talented external section. Almost everybody in that section has gone on to be an ambassador. Doug Heck was the political counselor for part of that time, became ambassador to Niger and Nepal. Galen Stone succeeded him, and he became later ambassador to Cyprus. Nick Veliotes was in that section, was a colleague, went on of course to Jordan and Egypt. Roger Kirk was our Soviet specialist. Mary Olmsted was across the way in the internal section, and Howie Schaffer, who's now ambassador in Bangladesh. Looking back on it, I suspect Delhi was a little overstaffed with talent.

Q: I should say. But what an exciting time to be there.

COON: It was an exciting time to be in India. Of course at the very end of my Bombay tour, Nehru had died, and that was a transition in India. When Lal Bahadur Shastri died, Indira Gandhi became prime minister. So that was another transition.

Q: Did you feel any fallout from the election of Kennedy overseas?

COON: I was in Bombay at the time. I don't remember any particular fallout from the election. The Indians were generally, I think, very well disposed, because in the history of the subcontinent, the Indians generally felt they fared better under Democrats and the Pakistanis under Republicans, so that I think the Indians were quite positive.

I was in Bombay when Kennedy was assassinated, and the impact was absolutely phenomenal. It was unbelievable. To this day, I don't understand the magic that he managed to project around the world. This chief minister that I mentioned said that he had been up in his village home-and he came from a real Indian village-and he said his nephew came in that morning to tell him, weeping, with the tears running down his face. There was a tremendous amount of emotion involved in that.

Q: And as you say, worldwide.

COON: Worldwide. And it spread on the Indian grapevine. I think every Indian must have known in a matter of hours.

Q: Did you have, in Bombay at the consulate general, a period of mourning where you weren't supposed to entertain and go out and so forth?

COON: Yes, we had a month, as I recall; a month's period of mourning. We had a book to be signed at the consulate general. You're never prepared for these things. I remember tearing around, and we ended up with a ledger because nobody could find a proper condolence book. Then we had to rush out and get black crepe, which wasn't readily available, to put around the ledger. Later we arranged a memorial service at the Catholic cathedral. It was just packed.

All the women at the consulate were desperately trying to find something to wear on their heads, because almost none of us had hats. When I came out as a consular officer, I had gotten a white veil and a black veil. Identical veils, one for weddings and one for funerals, so I was equipped. But I remember that period vividly. Every Foreign Service officer remembers, who was overseas. I was woken up with the news in the middle of the night because of the time difference. It was early morning.

Q: It was quite something. In Baghdad, even the Russians came in with tears in their eyes to sign the book.

COON: It was just amazing.

Q: Of course, at that time we didn't know a lot of things that we know now. We've had rude awakenings for many years, with our leaders, haven't we?

COON: He projected a dynamism and a youth and an energy and hope that was just felt all around the world.

Q: Yes, definitely. Well, after that, there is a great gap in your career in Who's Who. Ten years.

COON: All right. I came back to Washington from Delhi. In the course of my Delhi assignment, the India desk officer had come out, actually a couple of times, a man named Carleton Coon.

Q: I see. He was the desk officer.

COON: The first time I met him I was up to my ears in a rather complicated arrangement between India, Nepal, and the United States, where we were attempting to help the Nepalese and also encourage some better relations between India and Nepal. In the course of this effort, we undertook to provide some construction equipment to the Indians. The Indians were going to use it to build an east-west highway in Nepal. This was a road that would go from the eastern to the western end of Nepal at the southern edge where the terrain is not as mountainous, in the plains area called the Terai.

Well, the Indians were skeptical about whether we were going to come through with our construction equipment, and I had been sending off messages, and there had been great negotiations in the United States about breaking some equipment out of Army stores, I think. I was very anxious to get a token shipment at that time of four bulldozers and ten dump trucks.

So I was introduced to Carleton Coon for the first time in the political counselor's office and apparently turned on him roundly, as he remembers it, and said, "Where are my bulldozers and my dump trucks?" [Laughter]

He was astonished because he had seen my name at the bottom of reports as J.S. Abell and didn't know I was a woman. So we met initially over bulldozers and dump trucks. Then he came back on another trip, and I don't remember very much about that trip. I think we had dinner together, but it was strictly as professional colleagues. He was married with a family, and I certainly didn't think twice about the contact.

I was assigned back to the States in February of '67. I had arranged to have furniture built in Delhi before I came back, and after I came back I bought a small house on Capitol Hill. Just a gem of a place, a lovely little place right on Third Street. And I settled and moved my furniture in June.

Meantime I had seen Carl a couple of times professionally. Shortly thereafter his wife died of cancer.

Q: You didn't know her?

COON: I had met her, once or twice, but she'd been ill with cancer for some time. In the following weeks and months Carl persuaded me that it would be wise to give up my little house on the hill and become a Foreign Service spouse instead of a Foreign Service Officer.

Q: How did you feel about that? Here you had this terrific career going. You were one of the stars.

COON: To use a clichï¿½, I guess I was somewhat swept off my feet. Carl has often said that he was slightly crazy at the time, as you are in a period like that, and he was enormously intent and enormously determined, and it seemed as if I had little choice.

Q: A very persuasive man.

COON: He had six children, so really the question of continuing in the Service was not a very real option at the time, quite aside from the fact that the service did not allow women who were married to Foreign Service officers to continue in the service.

Q: The unwritten rule. Didn't you have to think several times before you took on six children and gave up your career? I think you were very, very brave.

COON: Either that or not very wise.

Q: How old were the children at this time?

COON: The youngest was four, and the oldest was sixteen. It ran sixteen, fifteen, roughly fourteen, twelve, six, and four.

Q: So the little ones really needed a mother very badly, didn't they?

COON: Yes. I think it did take a fair amount of thought.

Q: How did your family feel? Did they give you any of their ideas on this?

COON: I think my family was in a state of considerable shock, as a matter of fact. [Laughter] They thought I had gone out of my mind. But they'd been used to me doing strange things.

Q: I should say. By now they must have been. But you didn't worry about giving up your complete freedom to do whatever you wanted? I mean, you have to do a lot of compromising.

COON: I don't think I was aware of the business of giving up one's freedom. I wasn't quite clever enough to have figured that one out. Even after we were married, on several occasions I'd forget to tell Carl where I was going or when I was going to be home in the evening, and I discovered that you didn't do that.

Q: Panic sets in.

COON: Yes. I was just used to being independent and on my own and not responsible for telling anybody anything, so it took me a while to get used to that.

Q: But how did you get used to the day-in, day-out taking care of children, running a house? Because it's very, very tiring work, and not much intellectual stimulation.

COON: I was just absolutely swamped, when I look back on it. I knew virtually nothing about cooking. We were married in early January. Thank heaven, Carl figured out that we needed a honeymoon-or a honeycomb as our youngest called it-and we went on a three-week honeycomb to Morocco. When we got back I plunged in.

The first weekend-let's see, two of the children were in boarding school at that time, but there were four in residence. I shopped and I shopped and I shopped and I shopped on a Friday afternoon when we got back. I filled the [supermarket] basket. I'd always gone through the express lane in my single days-I mean quite literally. I came home and I cooked that weekend, and by Sunday night we had just totally run out. I had some saltines and a couple of cans of Welsh rabbit. I just had no notion of how to shop for a family of this size.

Cooking-I had to spend an awful lot of time learning to cook. You can make things by following recipes, but the real problem is making them come out at the same time.

Q: That's right. It's an art, and it takes years to learn.

COON: You know, the meat would be done, and the potatoes would go in, and the potatoes would be done, and the vegetables would be started, and the family would eat dinner ad seriatim. I must say they put up with a lot. But I was so busy I didn't have a chance to think about much of anything. That was two years, 1968 to 1970, when, you will recall, it was not the easiest period in the world to raise teenagers, under any circumstances, and when you're trying to patch together a family that has gone through a very traumatic experience-it had its moments.

Q: I can imagine. Did the children accept you? Or some did, and some didn't, I suppose.

COON: They all, I think, made a real effort to, and yet many of them had an awful lot of-I learned a lot about grief at that time. I learned that grief and anger and guilt are all part of a package, and that the children were all sort of determined to accept me, and I think, probably, looking back on it, we didn't allow enough venting. Neither we nor they understood what was going on. So that there would be a lot of anger that would manifest itself in anger at me; and anger at their mother deserting them, in effect.

Q: And just the anger that any normal teenager feels.

COON: And almost always when children lose a parent, there's a sense of guilt about: "Maybe if I hadn't done this, it wouldn't have happened." You get all of those emotions wrapped up, and you've got a fairly lively situation.

Q: Multiplied by eight people.

COON: [Laughter] I can honestly say that I worked harder during that period than I have ever worked in the Foreign Service, and I am under no illusions about what a woman who looks after a family does. I worked incredibly hard during that period. Every time you were just bollixed up to a fare-thee-well in the kitchen trying to get dinner, would be the moment that a child had to talk to you about something. They never can talk to you about something when you're at leisure.

So that was an action-packed two years. The older children being kicked in and out of schools. Oh, goodness.

Q: Were they away at boarding school?

COON: Some of them were away at various times, and then they'd be home. Getting one of them through his last term at boarding school while he was on probation for a disciplinary problem, praying that we'd get to graduation day. That was a very, very difficult period, but it was a tremendously rewarding period, too. Sometimes I've said that it was sort of like going from black-and-white to Kodachrome. Instead of your mind being engaged, your emotions are engaged as well as your mind, in ways that are enormously expanding and stretching.

Q: Do you think the fact that you had come from a reasonably good-sized family helped you cope with all of this? You had four children in your family.

COON: It may have, except I was the youngest, so if I'd been the oldest . . .

Q: That's true, you were the youngest, and they were all boys.

COON: Yes, and they were boys, and when you're the youngest, you're not in a caretaker role in the family at all.

Q: That's true. Did you have more difficulty, or less difficulty with the boys, because of having had brothers? You never had a sister.

COON: No, I think it was more a question of age, and the personalities of the children. Personalities which changed. I mean they evolved and changed, but it was a rough period.

Q: Oh, it must have been terrible for you. Everybody in town thought you were a heroine.

COON: The town must have thought I was a fool. [Laughter]

Q: No, they didn't think that, but they certainly thought you were a heroine, to go from no children to six-BING!-just like that. And unfortunately, you can't put them in the deep freeze, much as you might like to.

COON: No, you sure can't.

Q: Did you and Carleton go overseas then?

COON: In 1970 we went overseas again. Carl went to be DCM in Kathmandu for Ambassador Laise. We had taken our first holiday, a short trip to Mexico in early January, and I had ended up falling off a pyramid in Mexico and getting a very severe dislocation, so my leg was in a cast. Then I came down with hepatitis. So that was a bad patch. [Laughter]

Q: I must say, you really don't do things halfheartedly, Jane.

COON: Carl had to leave for Kathmandu in early March, God bless him. I was flat on my back at that point, trying to get the house packed up and whatnot. It was quite a job. But he came back and got me the end of April, which was one of the nicest things he ever did. So we went out with just the two younger children in May, and the two older daughters joined us in June.

Q: With the two younger children, who were how old at that time?

COON: Richard was in the first grade, and Ellen was in the third grade, and the two older daughters came out for the summer.

Q: What kind of school was there in Kathmandu for these children?

COON: It was a small American international school, Lincoln School, which was a very good school, and I was very pleased with it.

Q: You were there two years, were you?

COON: Three and a half years.

Q: Were you really? That is a good long time. You not only are one of the women who left the service to be married, but you subsequently came back in, and you had left at a pretty high position and now you were the wife of a DCM. How was that, switching gears that way?

COON: I don't think I was very conscious that it was difficult, but in fact, looking back on it, it was difficult. We were out in the Foreign Service context again, in a wonderfully exciting assignment. We loved Kathmandu. It was a wonderful family post in the sense that you could do a lot together as a family. And we did a lot of day hikes. Once I got over my problem with my ankle, we did several treks during the three-and-a-half year period. Mostly, I think with one exception, with the children. So it was a very satisfying family post.

I was in the slightly anomalous position of being the DCM's wife, working under an [woman] ambassador who didn't have a spouse in residence.

Q: That's the point I should have made, because in effect you had to be the ambassador's wife, didn't you?

COON: I had to work out that relationship. I worked it out, I think, to a large extent, to my satisfaction. I'm not the least bit sure whether I worked it out to the ambassador's satisfaction.

Q: You did. I can tell you that.

COON: Because at the beginning, I was fairly certain that she wasn't quite sure whether to treat me as another officer on the staff or the DCM's wife or quite how. Clearly, I was not another officer on the staff, and I also wasn't, as the DCM's spouse, about to play the role of her staff aide. Nor could I play, really, the role of her spouse, in terms of entertaining and that sort of thing. So that we had to work out a workable relationship.

Q: But vis-ï¿½-vis the other women, you fulfilled the role of ambassador's wife, didn't you?

COON: To a large extent, yes, in terms of the American Woman's Club.

Q: Yes. The things that a male ambassador's wife generally does.

COON: I think people were still calling on the DCM's wife in those days, and so I played that role. Communicators' wives, and officers' wives, and everybody called. Because of the children being in school, I took an active role in the school, and was on the school board for a couple of years.

Q: In effect, you would sort of be the welfare officer, wouldn't you? Not officer, but the person in touch with the community. If there were any morale problems or something, you would hear about it?

COON: That's the supposed role of the DCM's wife. I'm not sure I played that role very effectively. I think it was a role I wasn't terribly accustomed to. In retrospect, I'm not sure at all how well I played that role. I think in some respects I did. I tried to be sympathetic to women who had teenage problems, because heaven knows, I shared a number of those problems. We were all in it together.

We had a fairly busy social schedule. Carl has always-and I certainly share this-we've always been very interested in the Peace Corps, so we very often had Peace Corps volunteers around. A couple of times we had volunteers who were in for medical problems and would stay with us for several weeks at a time. PCVs who were interested in music particularly gravitated to Carl. And there were just an awful lot of people who came through Kathmandu, either officially or unofficially, or friends of the family, or friends of friends of friends, or their children. It seemed to me that we always had people staying in the house, and many of them were thoroughly off-beat and very interesting.

Q: I gather that Nepal does attract-

COON: Well, you have to recall that this was the early "70s. Nepal was the last stop on the hippie trail, and Nepal was overrun with hippies. But there were also mountaineering expeditions, there were trekkers of various kinds, and there were just an awful lot of really very thoroughly off-beat people who came through Nepal that were fun, in many cases.

And then the girls were there in the summertime. Lizzy came back to school. We put her in Woodstock after Christmas. She is the next-to-the youngest daughter. So that I spent some time, particularly the first year, traveling between Kathmandu and Woodstock.

Q: Where's Woodstock?

COON: In Mussoorie, north of Delhi. A former missionary boarding school that a lot of American families who have served in India have had youngsters in.

Q: Was this because you didn't want her so far away from you?

COON: Yes. We took a couple of great R and R's from Kathmandu. Generally, you got a little bit claustrophobic in the valley in the summertime. We took one R and R to Australia, where we took the two youngest children, and we met our daughter Kathy. Spent some time on a sheep station and the Great Barrier Reef. The second summer we spent in East Africa, Kenya and Tanzania.

Q: Your family likes the outdoors a great deal?

COON: Well, we actually learned to. We had not been outdoors people particularly. We started really camping and trekking in Nepal, because it was about the only way you could see any of the country, and it was the principal outdoor exercise. So we took a trek to base camp Everest and up the Jomasom Trail. We took four major treks, ten days to two weeks each, and several shorter ones.

Q: I don't think we went into your experience and liking for sports. I know as a child you weren't particularly interested, but when you were in Northfield and college, did you go out for sports?

COON: No, I wasn't particularly. In college I was working most of the time. I enjoy walking, and as an adult, have come to thoroughly enjoy canoeing. When I had an opportunity in New Hampshire, I used to ski, but most of my adult life I've been in non-skiing countries. I enjoy the outdoors, and also later in life, I've come to love gardening. All the Abells have come back to gardening. Paul is an enthusiastic gardener, and then my father always had a huge garden. We all reacted violently against picking all those strawberries and weeding all those things. Three out of four of us have come back to gardens.

I think the last two years in Nepal I began to get very restless. And again, not recognizing it at the time, but in retrospect, I think I had periods of significant depression. Again, it was a question of not having a job. When you have been in a professional situation and then are in a position where you are the spouse of the DCM, or whatever, you have a change of identity, and your identity to a very large extent becomes a derivative identity. Again, I wasn't particularly conscious of it at the time, but in retrospect I think I had a hard time on the issue of a derivative identity.

Q: Sure, sure. You weren't Jane Abell Coon, you were Mrs. Carleton Coon.

COON: That's right. That's right. I noticed it in social situations, and in my present job I use it as a training device. At a cocktail party, when you would be introduced to a young male officer from another embassy, or from your own embassy, you would find, more often that not, he would be looking directly over your shoulder as he was introduced to you and shaking your hand, obviously looking for somebody interesting to talk to. I now act this out with junior officers.

Q: Do you? Good.

COON: Suggest that this is not the way to get ahead.

Q: No, and I think it must have been difficult not to be on the inside anymore.

COON: Well, Carl has always talked about his work. I'd been in the Foreign Service and Carl discussed his office.

Q: But you weren't reading the cables.

COON: No, I wasn't reading cables, but we discussed a great deal of what went on. And of course the ambassador treated me as sort of at least half an officer. Which I appreciated. She was very good about that. So that I wasn't on the outside completely. Probably more on the inside than most spouses in a similar position, because I'd done the work. But it was still partly a derivative identity. It was also a question of-which did not reflect terribly well on me-that I did not really have the self-discipline to take on an independent, say writing project, or something like that. I was a product of my profession, and without external events in a sense setting my agenda, I had a hard time setting my own agenda. That's the best way to put it.

Q: Well, I think that an awful lot was asked of you: to completely turn your life around into another totally different channel.

COON: I have a great deal of regard, a very great respect for wives in the Foreign Service who have the capacity to set their own agendas and get on with an independent life-whether it's writing or art or whatever it may be. I learned to have a great deal of respect for that.

Q: How did this manifest itself? You were tired all the time, that sort of depression? Just didn't enjoy life much?

COON: Yes, I wasn't as active as I should have been, and I didn't get out as much as I should have during periods.

Q: How did you feel about entertaining and having people there so much? Did you get fed up with that?

COON: I don't think so. To this day, I don't find hostessing large cocktail parties a great joy, but no, I didn't mind a stream of people through the house. At least, I don't think I did, because many of them were quite interesting.

Now there was one development up in Kathmandu that I think relates a little bit to the theme of this enterprise, and it certainly has made an enormous difference in a lot of my attitudes and thinking. In the early '70s the women's movement reached Kathmandu-although in the United States it had begun in the '60s, but everything in the Foreign Service is about ten years later. A group of young American women in Kathmandu-some school teachers, some young AID professionals, a Peace Corps staff wife-anyway, about fifteen younger women in their late '20s, early '30s, got together to form a woman's consciousness group.

They had fair diversity in terms of being married or single, and in terms of background, but apparently after they got together a few times, they decided they didn't have enough diversity of age, so they very tentatively approached me and the AID director's wife, a woman, as I was, in her early forties at that time. I guess maybe Helen Ide was a little older than I was. She had seven children, and I had six. And they asked us if we'd like to join, and Helen and I thought about it and said, yes, we'd be delighted.

Well, that turned out to be, I think, a very unusual and important experience for me, in the sense that it was my first exposure to any of the thinking, any of the consciousness, any of the evolution of the women's movement. I can't even remember how often we met-every two weeks or something like that for the better part of a year. So we got to know each other very well, and I still keep in touch with some of these women. It really was an eye-opener for me, just absolutely an eye-opener.

Q: You read the literature, did you?

COON: Yes, we read some of the literature. One of the women had been in a group in the United States and had some notion of how you led them. So that we'd take a topic each week, or every two weeks or whenever we met, and discuss a topic. And it was, I think for all of us, a very important and useful experience.

Q: Did you go through a phase of intense anger?

COON: During that period?

Q: As you realized the subtle put-downs and all? Having had a very successful career yourself, perhaps you didn't feel that you had been treated as a second-class citizen?

COON: I don't recall going through a period of anger. I recall becoming very conscious of some of my own inherent patterns and attitudes; that at a party I would avoid talking to other women because men were obviously the only interesting people to talk to. When I got over that, I discovered there were, gee, an awful lot of interesting women.

Q: Who didn't just want to talk babies.

COON: Who didn't just want to talk babies. So it really changed my social behavior.

Q: We were part of our own problem, weren't we?

COON: Oh, we were very much a part of our own problem. And it also made one very conscious of the level of competitiveness among women; that we competed with each other rather brutally for the attention of men. My exposure certainly raised my consciousness of women's issues.

There were two things that came earlier, that are at least worth mentioning. The earliest one, I remember treating with sort of astonishment and amazement. It was in Karachi way back in the late "50s. I'd gone out as a woman officer in my first post. In the "50s, at least the conventional wisdom was that a woman secretary hated working for a woman officer. We were poison to secretaries. I was conscious of this, and I always tried to be terribly careful in the way I handled myself in the office vis-ï¿½-vis secretaries. Of course, I had never dreamt of dictating or anything like that. Just really out of the question.

One day in Karachi, after I'd been there sometime, one of the two secretaries in the political section-I still remember her name-Marie Martinez-marched into my office and said, "Jane, if you're going to get on in this business, you're going to have to learn to dictate."

And I said, "I can't dictate."

She said, "I'm going to sit down here. You have some thank-you letters to do." For the ambassador or somebody. "I'm going to sit down here with my book, and I don't care how long it takes, and I'm not going to look at you. I'm just going to sit here, and you're going to dictate."

And so I stuttered through two or three two-sentence short thank-you letters. At intervals Marie would come back and make me dictate, and I learned to dictate. I learned something else about a woman helping a woman. She was amazing. Why she did it, to this day I don't know, but it certainly made a lot of difference.

And then, of course, the second event was probably common to just about every woman of my generation sometime in the mid-'60s. Several years after the book came about, somebody sent me a copy of Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique, and that was an eye-opener. There we are, my generation.

Q: That was the seminal work for you, was it?

COON: Oh, I think so, yes. I think it was for a lot of us. So those two preceded this woman's group in Kathmandu, but I think the woman's group in Kathmandu certainly changed and internalized an awful lot of different attitudes. I don't think I have ever since then had the same sense of women as competitors. I think it's made possible, not only for me, but for many, many other women, the informal networks we have now, which I think are invaluable. I really look back on that as a very important event.

Q: Yes, and I suppose it changed the way you thought about your daughters, didn't it? You were careful not to inculcate in them the same sort of competitiveness?

COON: I'm not sure. I don't know whether I did or not.

Q: It's interesting because we can intellectualize something, but the application is not always right there. Well, I mean such things as making sure the girl is attractive physically, and always looks nice, and has the pretty dress, and that sort of thing.

COON: Oh, yes. Well, I'd never been terribly good at that anyway. [Laughter]

Q: Because that was so important to our mothers, certainly.

COON: Also, I have long felt that the woman's movement liberated the men as much as the women. Certainly, the organization of our family when we got back to the States evolved in different directions. My husband, for example, actually enjoys doing grocery shopping more than I do, but before it wasn't sort of okay. He enjoys cooking breakfast; I hate cooking breakfast, and so when we came back he became the breakfast cook. There were little things like that, which not only freed me up, but freed him up to do things that he enjoyed.

Q: Which were thought sissy before.

COON: Isn't that ridiculous? It would have been interesting to have taken a census in a Giant Store in 1959 as to how many men were there, and how many men are there now.

Q: There would be very few in those days, I'm sure.

COON: I suspect.

Q: Now of course it depends on the time of day. I saw a man the other day with a baby in a Snuggly strapped to his chest. Now I've seen a lot of babies on the backs of men, but this was the first time I'd ever seen it carried the way a young mother usually carries the baby, and it was the cutest thing. Here he was with his little baby nodding. That would never have happened a few years back.

COON: So we left Kathmandu in September of '73 and came back a year. Carl was assigned as diplomat-in-residence in Northfield, Minnesota, at Carleton College. Which meant putting the children in school, actually late, the first of November. We spent the academic year in Northfield, which I rather enjoyed, although I still had this restlessness about not having a defined role.

Toward the end of that year, I was invited to do a lecture for one of the courses on China, on the Sino-Indian War, and I dove into the research on that, and just thoroughly enjoyed it. I spent about a month on one lecture. Carl and I did some joint lectures at various colleges in the Middle West. So I began to get back a little bit.

Now it was at this time, too, when we came back, that someone from the Department, whose name escapes me, approached me on the subject of coming back into the Foreign Service. The window had been opened for women who had left during the period I left. I don't think I ever would have, on my own, applied. I'm not sure why. At that point I was thinking just very faintly of going back to law school, but this woman approached me and sent me all the papers, and when I was in Washington she encouraged me to come in and talk. And we did, and I applied.

Q: She was a Foreign Service officer herself?

COON: She was in the Department, in an office that was concerned with this business of bringing women back in. I do not remember her name, but I, again, give her a lot of credit for taking initiative rather than just sort of ... So I applied. I don't know whether it was before we left for Morocco the next summer, or after we got to Morocco, I was accepted back in at my old grade. They said that they could defer until we returned to Washington, so it was a two-year deferral there. I don't know, it may have been only a one-year, because of the security clearance; I don't remember exactly. So anyway, we went from Minnesota to Morocco.

Again, I considered this sort of something in my hip pocket, so to speak, coming back into the Service, but it didn't seem to me to be very viable if we had another overseas assignment after Morocco.

Q: What was Carl's position there?

COON: Carl was DCM. This was not something that was going to be very practical if Carl went on to be DCM elsewhere or got his own mission. But after a couple of years in Morocco, we did come back.

Q: Could you just tell me about that time when you were in Morocco? You made the statement that you were restless at the time, but is there anything else from that period that you feel helped you subsequently when you were an ambassador? Again, you were the DCM's wife.

COON: Well, I think I was very fortunate that the ambassador was Bob Neumann, and his wife was Marlen Neumann, two people for whom I have a very, very high regard. Both of them included me as an intelligent member of the community, so to speak. And Marlen and I got along very well. She is an outstanding woman, and Ambassador Neumann was a person who treated both men and women with a great deal of respect. So I think that was a plus. I became a member of the Tangier-American school board, which meant visits up to Tangier. We did quite a lot of traveling in Morocco, and I also spent a month, which was useful, on my own in France at Besanï¿½on studying French; living with a French family and studying French one summer, because my French was terrible. Still is.

Q: Do you like the Maghreb?

COON: Yes. Particularly Morocco.

Q: Fez is a fascinating place, isn't it? Well, so is Rabat.

COON: Carl included me in all of his work, so that I certainly stayed in touch with things Foreign Service. But it was a difficult period. The children were older by that time-Richard in the sixth and seventh grades and Ellen in the eighth and ninth grades.

Q: Junior high is difficult.

COON: Yes, but also, you know, they've got their own activities, too. Gosh, I even did the Little League bit.

Q: Did you really?

COON: Hauling children to the Little League games. Can't believe it now.

Q: So you can certainly write the book on how to be a Foreign Service wife, ambassador, officer, mother, whatever.

COON: Single, married, you name it. [Laughter]

Q: You've done it all.

COON: As soon as we found out [we were returning to Washington], I let them know, and I came on duty roughly the end of September 1976. I was asked what areas I was interested in working in, and I was pretty out-of-touch by that time with the Department. Nine years is a long time.

I don't remember what-all I put down, but I did include OES, the Office of Oceans, Environment, and Science. I had some notion that this was going to be a brave new world for Foreign Service work, and I thought it was interesting, and I'd never done anything in this area. It was an area where I could learn a lot. And I didn't really anticipate a great deal of upward mobility after I came back. I was thinking in terms of adapting to Carl's onward assignments.

Q: So you still had some of that women's things left.

COON: I sure did. Oh, absolutely. If somebody had told me in 1976 I was going to be an ambassador in 1981, I'd have told them they were bonkers. It didn't cross my mind. Really. So the Department quickly assigned me to OES, because that was not a highly sought-after bureau at the time. I was put into the Office of Nonproliferation and Nuclear Export Policy, into what was, as I look back on it, truly a dead-end job.

I knew I couldn't even spell the word nuclear, so that I managed in October to shoehorn my way into a training course that was given by the Department of Energy on the nuclear fuel cycle. It is one of the best training courses in the US Government. Two or three days here in Washington on the nuclear fuel cycle, and two days at Los Alamos, where I picked up, essentially, the jargon.

Then, of course, the election was in November. Carter came in, and nonproliferation was a very hot issue. That was one of the major items on his agenda. So this became a very busy and rather high profile office.

Q: Were you at the same rank as you had been when you left?

COON: Yes.

Q: Which was a "three?"

COON: Yes.

Q: So you began to get higher visibility.

COON: The office, at any rate, did. I'm not sure I did. Essentially, in that year I dealt with, not the major nonproliferation issues but a series of agreements on cooperation in the nuclear field with a variety of countries, and a lot of nitty-gritty issues on transfer of technology and nuclear exports. But I learned the vocabulary, I learned the major issues in nonproliferation. I knew the difference between reprocessing and enrichment, and that sort of thing.

So late that spring of 1977, Nick Veliotes approached me and asked me-he was principal deputy in NEA, and Nick and I had served together in Delhi-asked me if I would be interested in the Pakistan country directorate, although I was vastly under-ranked for the job. It was normally a "one" job, class 1.

And I said, "Yes." Indeed. I had South Asia experience, and I think NEA recognized that having someone that knew the nonproliferation game was useful, because that was virtually the only issue on our platter with Pakistan at that time. It certainly was by far the major issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan-Bangladesh office.

So they managed to swing the "stretch" assignment, and I came over as office director in summer of '77.

Q: Was this because you knew the nuclear game, but you also had had so much experience in South Asia? The two things came together?

COON: Yes. I knew South Asia. The two things came together. I had a reputation as a South Asian, from my previous lengthy experience in South Asia, including Pakistan, and it came together with this experience in OES on nonproliferation. I use this as an example to younger officers now, that what you think may be a dead-end job can turn out to be a springboard. Because that certainly turned out to be the springboard into PAB, as far as I was concerned.

Q: This led to a promotion fairly rapidly, I should imagine.

COON: I don't remember when I got my-certainly I was there a couple of years before I got my "two." The first year personnel made a mistake when I was in OES and I wasn't even competed, because they got the files mixed up.

PAB turned out to be a tremendously challenging job, as they say. As I look back on it, I think I was in well over my head, but managed to stay afloat. I worked for Spike Dubs, who was the Deputy Assistant Secretary.

Spike left after a year, and this was at a period when Cyrus Vance was urging every bureau to have a woman as a deputy assistant secretary, and Hal Saunders and Harry Barnes approached me on moving up to the DAS job. I thought about it long and hard and felt that I was not ready for it. I told them that I thought I would be much better off staying in PAB, that I was not ready to move up. And I think I was right. You can't be out of the Service for nine years without losing a lot of the key stepping stones and the key experience that you need.

So I remained a second year in PAB, and then was going to move over to the parallel country directorate, INS, the India-Nepal-Sri Lanka country directorate, when the DAS job opened up again, unexpectedly. Hal approached me again and said he thought I was ready. I said, well, I wasn't sure, but I did take it. So I moved up to the DAS job.

Q: Your rise was meteoric; I do recall that.

COON: There wasn't another person that quite fit that had the South Asian experience, I think. It was an action-packed four years, PAB and the DAS for South Asia. It covered the first revolution in Afghanistan in '78, and the very complex nuclear issues with Pakistan, which led to our cutting off aid to Pakistan; the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bangladesh, in the meantime, was ticking along rather nicely. In fact we used to joke that Bangladesh was the most stable country in my bailiwick.

And then of course, from '79 to '81, there was the Iranian hostage thing, the overrunning of the embassy in Islamabad, the evacuation of 950 dependents from NEA posts, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and the attempt to reestablish our relations with Pakistan, while still coping with the nuclear issues, both in Pakistan and India. So we had the whole gamut of foreign policy issues from nuclear, the Russians, narcotics, refugees, issues of stability, issues with the IMF, debt rescheduling, AID-it covered the gamut, there. Plus the issues of terrorism and such things as the mob attack on the embassy. And of course, one of the most tragic events was Spike Dubs' assassination. I was on my way to South Asia, and arrived in Karachi on the fourteenth of February, where I was met with the news of Spike's assassination. I was going up to Kabul anyway, so I shortened my stay in Karachi, went directly up to Kabul-flew to Peshawar and drove to Kabul. Got there, I guess, two days after the assassination. I was there before the Presidential plane arrived. It was a special plane, with Mary Ann Dubs aboard, to take Spike back. And then I stayed on for about ten days, almost in the role of acting DCM to the chargï¿½. That was a difficult period.

I said earlier, I went out as a "three" and came back as a "three," but I don't think I was the same person when I came back. I had had a range of experience in a family situation, as well as a spouse, which certainly served me in good stead, and I was never more conscious of it than during that week in Kabul. What I had learned when I first married into the family about the syndrome of anger and grief and fear was played out in the whole American community in Kabul at that time, and I could at least walk in and recognize this syndrome of tremendously intense feeling.

Because Spike had been very much a father figure in the community. There was rage in the community over his assassination, and fear over what it implied because-to this day we don't really know what that was all about. And of course, acute grief. It was a stricken community. I think many of the things that I learned as a spouse, I brought to apply in that situation, and was able to make a better professional contribution.

Q: Did you stay on there for that period sort of as a mother figure for them?

COON: I don't think I stayed on as a mother figure, but I stayed on as a support figure for the DCM and, to some extent, a lightning rod for the community, because I represented Washington, and they could pour out their anger at Washington. Which wasn't an altogether comfortable role, but it was a role which I recognized was a useful role.

Q: Was this your choice to stay there?

COON: Oh, yes.

Q: I'm sure you did a great deal of good.

COON: Then I continued my trip on to Nepal and India and Bangladesh. So it was an action-packed four years. There's one other feature of that period, particularly '79 to '81. I was in the bureau as a DAS, and in '79 my husband, who had been in FSI as deputy director, came over to head up the Office of North African affairs. So we were in-for NEA at any rate-an unprecedented situation where the wife was at the DAS level and the husband at the office director level. I give absolutely 100 percent marks to my husband for handling that magnificently.

Another thing I did shook up NEA during that period-it was when I got into the country directorate in '77. The head secretary in PAB, the country directory's secretary, left just after I got there, and I had to hire a new secretary. I went through the whole panel business of interviewing the candidate who were put to me, and I selected by far the best, who happened to be one of the three male secretaries in the department at the time. He was a person of very considerable self-confidence, a tremendously competent secretary.

And he had a sense of humor. Again, I think my colleagues were somewhat bemused by this. Although my office gained great prestige, because all of the secretaries in the department thought that to have this chap in my office was very prestigious. He just loved it when I'd be standing in the outer office and somebody would come in busily carrying a piece of paper and walk up to me and say, "Would you please get this to the director." And he would stand there just hooting with laughter, because they obviously mistook me for the secretary.

Q: Of course. You were the secretary. How old a man was he?

COON: He was younger than I was. I don't know; David was about thirty, maybe.

Q: But even looking that young, they still thought he was the boss?

COON: Well, not the boss. They probably thought he was a junior officer in the office, but they presume that a woman is a secretary, and David would just love these situations. He'd just hoot with laughter when somebody would come in and make this all too common mistake.

Q: I can imagine. Now, could you dictate to him?

COON: Oh, yes. By this time I was dictating very freely.

Q: You made the comment that at the time of the change of administration [to Reagan], you were approached, but Vance was particularly interested in putting women in as ambassadors.

COON: That's right.

Q: But you already had a good job.

COON: I had a good job. It opened up that Carl, who had dearly wanted to go back to Kathmandu as ambassador, was offered it. Kathmandu. And NEA put me up for Bangladesh, and this seemed like the best of all possible worlds. I considered it just such a long-shot; I didn't think it would ever work, but Carl, who is far more of an optimist than I am, said, "Well, give it a try." And it worked.

Q: Was there ever any doubt about accepting the jobs?

COON: No, no. Once we each were offered, no, there was no doubt. We were just so lucky to get countries so close, and to both get chiefs of mission jobs. We did not hesitate. He got his phone call from the president a couple of months before I did, I guess, and he went out first. God bless him, we were still a typical Foreign Service couple. He went out in June and left me to go out the end of July, and of course I had to get the house ready, the furniture into storage, and all of that. I swore I'd never do that again.

Q: I can imagine. With a house this big, too. The children at this stage were all old enough to be either in college or prep schools, I suppose.

COON: That's right. The children-let's see. I think our youngest son graduated from Andover that year. Or was it Ellen? Oh dear, isn't it awful when you can't remember when your children graduated? Well, we went up to New England for one of the children's graduations before we went out. Yes, of course it was, because Richard came down and spent the month of July with me, helping me pack out, and then he was going to go on to college.

And Ellen went out with her father. She was at Harvard, and she was going to take a term off from Harvard and go out with Carl. She took about every other term off from Harvard and spent it in Kathmandu with Carl, which worked out very nicely because she served essentially as his hostess. She adored Kathmandu, and she also gathered material for her senior thesis while she was there. Took her a couple of extra years to graduate, but that's all right.

Q: Oh, well, but think of the experiences.

COON: She was learning a lot. So we became what a couple of junior officers who were a tandem couple said, "You know, you're known as the 'ultimate tandem'." [Laughter]

Q: Well, you certainly are.

COON: I love being "the ultimate tandem."

Q: Because you did it at the same time, concurrently. There haven't been any others that did. Well, that's not true; Carol-

COON: Carol [Laise] and Ellsworth [Bunker].

Q: But don't forget, Carol went out as ambassador and then married, which is not the same thing, and she didn't have a family either.

COON: So the children were out for visits, and various children were out for Christmas at various times, but they were out of the nest, as they say.

Q: Did you have a housekeeper? And did Carl, as well as having his daughter?

COON: Yes. Yes. The way we arranged it is that we each had part-time housekeepers. I had, initially, the wife of one of the assistant GSOs, and later a Canadian wife, who worked twenty hours a week or perhaps less than that-sometimes less, sometimes more, depending on the amount of entertaining I did. She managed the residence staff, kept the cookbook, issued stocks from the godown, which you have in South Asia-the locked storeroom. Did menus and supervised cocktail parties and dinners and that sort of thing.

The way we usually worked it out-in Bangladesh you never knew whether people were going to turn up for dinner-I entertained mostly at round tables, where protocol was less of a problem. She'd stay until we sat down, so that we could rearrange the place cards for those guests that didn't turn out, and then she usually would go.

Q: That's a typically Muslim thing, isn't it? That's certainly true throughout the Middle East: You never know how many are coming.

COON: Yes. You just never know how many are going to come. And sometimes they'll bring a friend unexpectedly.

Carl likewise had a part-time housekeeper in Kathmandu that did roughly the same thing, supervised his staff, did the commissary shopping, followed the cookbook, and all of that sort of thing.

Q: And kept the books, I suppose, the receipts and all. Were you ever called in, when you were visiting Carl, to sort out any domestic problems?

COON: Oh, even with a housekeeper I felt that occasionally, yes, I would make my presence felt in terms of dust.

Q: Because I'm sure Carl didn't even see it.

COON: No, Carl didn't even see it. And arrangement of objects, and new curtains, or that sort of thing. Yes, I occasionally would, but I didn't make a big thing of it. And Carl reciprocated. Carl, whenever he came down to Dhaka, was my principal wine buyer. He'd always go into the commissary and stock up on wine for me.

Q: That's a good exchange of duties. But isn't it interesting how, again, the placement of objects is women's work?

COON: That's right.

Q: Selecting wine is men's work. We don't break the stereotypes too fast.

COON: [Laughter] Not too fast. I took an interest in his garden, too.

Q: Oh, he had a garden.

COON: Carl is not conscious of gardens, and I at least took an interest. I didn't do a whole lot, because he had a very good mali (gardener)-but I would always inspect the gardens.

Q: How did you work it? You went up there one month, and he'd come down, or how often were you able to-

COON: The general pattern that we set was-there were always exceptions-that I'd spend a few days one month up there, usually a long weekend. The following month he'd come down for a long weekend. So we'd see each other-I don't think we ever went more than six or seven weeks without seeing each other, and most of that time we saw each other at least every month.

Q: You had to travel on a commercial airline?

COON: Yes.

Q: You did not have a plane of your own, the way the Bunkers did?

COON: No, we did not have a plane of our own. But there was quite frequent air service. When we first went there, I think there were flights about four times a week, and by the time we left, they were up to five times a week one way and six times a week the other. Something like that. Almost one flight a day. Sometimes there were a couple of flights.

Q: You could get back and forth without too much-

COON: We could get back and forth fairly easily, and with the perks of being an ambassador, you know, could go out to the airport ten minutes before the plane left and be ushered on, and then be ushered off at the other end. The best time I think we ever made-I think I made it in about an hour and forty minutes, door to door. It usually was a couple of hours, but that's not bad. I was fifteen minutes from the airport, and Carl was perhaps even less.

Q: What about your daughter at the time? Did she used to come back and forth with her father?

COON: Usually not. Ellen came down and spent some time with me. She frankly preferred Kathmandu. I mean Nepal was her favorite country. She did a lot of trekking and that sort of thing. But she did come down several times.

Q: She was quite old enough to be left.

COON: Oh, yes.

Q: You said she had done one year in college?

COON: By that time she'd done a year in college, a year working, and a year in college.

Q: Oh, well, she was well-launched, so to speak.

COON: She's a very mature and very responsible person. She learned a lot in terms of social poise and that sort of thing being a hostess for Carl. She said it was good experience.

Q: Well, anything like that is so broadening. Just think of where you and I were in our second or third years in college.

COON: We had hay sticking out. [Laughter] Oh, dear.

Q: We did, didn't we? May we go back a bit-I have some specific questions I'm asking of everybody about preparing yourself for the job, and how you heard of your nomination, and that sort of thing. Could we go through that particular sequence of things, if you can remember? How did you hear about your nomination? Was it a phone call, or did somebody come by and tell you? Did the White House call, or what?

COON: Well, the first formal thing, of course, is your call from the President.

Q: But long before that, you know your name is over at the White House?

COON: But long before that, you know your name is over there.

Q: Were you surprised when you were offered a post of your own?

COON: This is awful to say, but I don't remember exactly the sequence of events. Carl was pretty well launched on Kathmandu. I guess I still didn't believe I could have a mission of my own.

Q: Could get it. But you had been hearing rumors?

COON: I knew that Dhaka was going to come open, and the other appropriate job in the subcontinent was DCM Delhi. That was coming open, too. I sat down with Nick Veliotes once, and I said, "Nick, I don't know. Maybe DCM Delhi would be the better of the two jobs."

Q: It's a huge mission.

COON: It's a huge mission. It's a big job. And who knows about Dhaka. I can still remember Nick with his big cigar saying, "Jane, don't kid yourself. It's a lot more fun to have your own mission. It may be small, but it's your own."

And I said, "Okay, Nick."

So I was NEA's candidate, and it went to whatever the committee was at the time. I don't remember exactly the committee arrangement at the time. I was put up to the White House. And for Bangladesh, when you get through the committee and are put to the White House, it's a pretty sure thing. You weren't likely to have too much political competition.

Q: Yes. Whereas I think there is for Nepal.

COON: There is for Nepal, that's right. But by this time Carl was well along. So I don't remember the exact moment that somebody told me that I'd been approved by the committee, and my name had gone to the White House. It just evolved through that winter. I knew I was NEA's candidate, and once I was NEA's candidate I was a fairly sure bet.

Q: I gather you didn't waste too much time worrying about it. Because it does drag out so.

COON: Oh, it drags out forever.

Q: I went through it with Elinor Constable, and she was just on pins and needles for weeks.

COON: Yes. I was so busy at the time that I don't think I had time to worry a great deal about it. I was more nervous about it in many ways than Carl, in that here we were shooting for these two posts, and what if one of us didn't get it?

Q: I see. Then the other one might be staying back here.

COON: Then what do we do? Then what happens? Because we were not anxious to have a long-distance marriage. So there was a certain amount of nervousness attached to it.

Q: But you were too busy, as you say.

COON: I guess I was pretty busy. Particularly February of '81. One of the very first things the new administration did was to launch a major review of Pakistan policy, and we put together this three billion dollar package to reconstruct our relationships with Pakistan. That was a tremendously big endeavor during that month of February. Ambassador Hummel was back from Pakistan to help shepherd it through, and then during the spring we had to negotiate with the congress over the nonproliferation aspects of it, so it was a period of tremendous activity.

Sometime in March, I think it was, that I got the phone call.

Q: Can you recall what was said?

COON: He [Reagan] asked me if I'd like to be ambassador to Bangladesh, and I said, "Sir, I'd be delighted." It was very- [Laughter]

Q: Pretty pro forma thing, is it?

COON: I can't remember quite what the circumstances were, but there were a whole lot of people in the kitchen.

Q: Oh, he called you at your home?

COON: Yes, he called at home. I was home, and there were a whole lot of people in the kitchen. Somebody answered the phone and said, "Jane, it's the White House." I knew what it was, obviously. I grabbed the phone, tried to close the kitchen door, and came around and found myself sort of down on my hands and knees, over there, with the telephone on the end of its wire, trying to sound composed and ambassadorial while there were half a dozen children screaming in the kitchen. Oh, dear. [Laughter]

Q: Funny! Oh, dear. I should imagine that after you hung up, your heart did a few flips.

COON: Well, yes, you do feel pretty good about it. Then it seemed as if it was really going to come to pass. Carl had gotten his. Then you have to go about all the nitty-gritty of filling out a thousand forms.

Q: Did you go through the one-week ambassador's seminar?

COON: Carl and I both went.

Q: You went together, did you?

COON: We went together.

Q: Ah, that's nice. Can you recall who the leaders were when you were there?

COON: Dean Brown and Shirley Temple Black.

Q: Dean Brown. Oh, yes, Brown and Black. Did you find it helpful? Or is it aimed pretty much at the people who are political appointees?

COON: I think I found it helpful. I think I found it very helpful, but I'm sort of a sucker for training programs, and I'm always curious-and I knew I had a lot to learn. Carl had been a DCM; I'd never been a DCM. I knew South Asia pretty well, and I had visited Bangladesh three or four times during my time in the country directorate and as DAS. Had met the president. Then tragically, the day that my appointment was announced-I think it was the thirty-first of May-the president was assassinated. I felt very badly about that. He was a very engaging figure and a leader that Bangladesh sorely missed. So it was, again, a fairly unstable situation when I went out.

Q: You went through the seminar together. Did you appear before the Senate together?

COON: No. I don't remember when Carl appeared. I appeared before the Senate the morning that we also had our photo op at the White House. I had my confirmation hearing with Senator Rudy Boschwitz from Minnesota, and then had to leap into a car and head for the White House as fast as I could go for the photo op with the President. Carl and I had that together, so that we have pictures individually with the president, and then one both together.

Q: Pretty heady atmosphere by that time.

COON: You're absolutely right.

Q: The questions asked at the Senate were pretty pro forma, were they? Were any penetrating?

COON: They were pretty pro forma. Indeed the staffer and I had gotten together in advance. The senator got into the pro forma questions about what are the major crops of Bangladesh, and I mentioned jute, and then he asked about exports, and I said, "Jute carpet backing." At which point he turned on. Up until that time it had been a very sleepy affair. He turned on with great interest and began to ask me detailed questions about whether the jute carpets were tufted or woven. And you know, I was okay on carpet backing but the tufted or woven I was a little weak on.

Afterward I learned that he has furniture or carpet stores himself and is very knowledgeable on the subject of imported carpets, and he was fascinated to discover there were jute carpets. The Bangladesh ambassador, who had also come to the hearing, was also fascinated, and presented the senator with a Bangladeshi jute carpet after the hearing, which he still, as far as I know, has in his office. So it was pro forma up to the jute carpet part, but it was not controversial in any way, shape, or form.

Q: What about the swearing-in? Was that done in tandem?

COON: No, Carl's swearing-in was done earlier. Well, that was a fairly action-packed period because Carl's father was very ill, which we weren't fully aware of. Anyway, Carl went up the beginning of June. His father died around the second of June, just before our son, Richard's graduation from Andover. We had both planned to be up there for Richard's graduation, which was just a few days later. So I flew up right away so we were there for his father's funeral. His father had been a very major figure in his life. And a major figure in American anthropology.

Q: Tremendous funeral, I suppose.

COON: Oh, no. It was strictly a family affair.

Q: But didn't Harvard do a memorial service?

COON: Well, we had a memorial service with some colleagues from Harvard. Then we had Richard's graduation. Then we both came back, and I think Carl's swearing-in was just after he got back, because he had to leave for post. There was a tremendous time jam, as there is with every one of these ambassadorial posts-the hearing, then the confirmation by the Senate, then swearing-in. What Carl was backed up against was a fourth of July reception, which he was supposed to host, and he had to get there just over a week in advance, in order to present his credentials to His Majesty, who only accepted the credentials of foreign ambassadors on Fridays. So we were really backed up there, and he and Ellen were frantic about getting out of here. But he did have his swearing-in ceremony, and several of the children came for it.

Then we had a marvelous take-off for his departure for Kathmandu. He was taking our two Lhasa apsos with him. So we got everything ready, Ellen and Carl packed, the two dogs in their boxes, tickets, passports, the works, got into our two cars, with Carl and I in one car, and the children following with the dogs in the other car, headed for Dulles Airport.

Got to Dulles: no children. They'd gotten off on the wrong exit. Well, we were in an absolute swivet. While we were there, right in front of the Pan Am sign, I said, "You go on in and at least get your ticket through the tickets business."

He went in, and he came out looking almost pale. We had failed to look at our tickets, and it was that wretched Pan Am flight that originates here at National, although it's an international flight. It originates at National and goes to JFK and then off. Well, we had not had the wit to look at our tickets, assuming international flights go from Dulles. About this moment Richard and Ellen came driving up, and with two cars, we took off for National and got there in about twenty minutes, I think, just barely in time to make the flight. All of these connections were crucial to getting there in time to present his credentials. After all of these years in the Foreign Service, not to look at one's ticket! We felt like a couple of greenhorns. So Richard and I stayed through the month of July, and I left in late July, and flew through to Kathmandu.

Q: What about your swearing-in?

COON: That's right. I must have been sworn in, I think, before Carl left. Gee, you know, that was so action-packed, I don't remember whether I was sworn in before Carl left. I don't think I was. My mother-in-law came down from New England, and several of the children came, and my brother and sister-in-law came, and I'm almost sure it was after Carl and Ellen had left. I know it was. It was in July. Of course.

Furthermore, because the ambassador in Dhaka, who was departing, was going to come back and take my job as DAS, we'd worked it all out that he would leave the very beginning of June and would come back and be able to relieve me toward the end of June, so I'd at least have the month of July. But after President Zia's assassination, it was such an uncertain situation, we asked him to stay on in Bangladesh. So he didn't leave until a week or so before I was going to arrive, but that meant that I had to hold down the DAS job, and I literally cleaned out my desk the day I left.

Q: Really! You know, there's got to be a better system.

COON: There's got to be a better system. Well, that was stupid of me, I think, looking back on it.

Anyway, I was exhausted, and got on the plane and flew directly through to Kathmandu with that awful stopover in Delhi in the early hours of the morning. Got to Kathmandu and just collapsed. Slept for about three days, I think.

My predecessor left toward the end of July, and then there was the Id holidays, when literally nothing happens. You cannot present your credentials. Also, I think it's an awful time for an ambassador to arrive when the people at post would rather like to take a little leave.

Q: And it must be so hot there in the summer.

COON: It's sticky. It's not as hot as north India in many ways, because it's overcast, but it's a very humid heat. Gets into the low '90s, mid-'90s.

Then the fifth of August, I departed Kathmandu with Ellen and flew down to Dhaka, where I was received by the chief of protocol, and the chargï¿½, and the country team, and whatnot, and arrived in my capacity as ambassador. This was a Thursday, and I thought I would have a week or more to-in fact I think it's desirable to have a delay between your arrival and your presentation of credentials, a week or so, so that you can get to know your own staff. But the Bangladeshis are very accommodating, and they arranged for my credentials ceremony the following Tuesday.

Q: What was that like?

COON: Well, in the first instance, my DCM told me that if I wished I could have a rehearsal, but he didn't think it was necessary because it was a very set drill, and it was all laid out in the protocol sheet. I guess I decided that the better part of valor is to be prepared, so I said, no, I thought I'd go through with the rehearsal. Which was perfectly legitimate. And I went over with one of the protocol people to the presidential palace. The presidential guard is lined up on the lawn. You're taken up on a little platform, and they play the national anthems, and then you walk down, review the guard, then go inside where you're introduced to the president and the exchange of credentials takes place.

I walked up on the platform, and then I walked along the area where the guard would be standing. As you recall, this is the monsoon season, and I had on medium heels, and with each step, I sunk into the wet lawn and would have to go, "errch," to extract myself, each step of the way. [Laughter] I visualized myself in the presentation of credentials, rooted to the presidential lawn and never getting in to present my credentials.

Which all goes to show that rehearsals have a function. So I wore my dress that I had very carefully selected for the presentation of credentials, and I did not wear the shoes that I was going to present the credentials in. I wore a pair of wedgie sandals that were not wholly appropriate to the dress, but at least didn't sink into the lawn.

Q: Isn't that funny. Long or short dress?

COON: It was a short dress. It was a white, very fine cotton dress, with a lot of green in it, which is the Bangladeshi color. With long sleeves and high neck.

Q: Yes. That's a very nice compliment to them, and I'm sure they noticed.

COON: I bore in mind that it was their national color, the design of the dress. And the wedgies didn't look too bad. They look a little odd in the photo.

Q: Yes, but you would have looked even odder . . .

COON: I would have looked even odder if I'd been rooted to the lawn.

Q: Or stepped out of your shoes!

COON: My advice is, practice and rehearse.

Q: I think that's a wonderful idea.

COON: Carl came down then, so he was there. He did not attend the presentation of credentials, because spouses were not invited to the presentation of credentials. Only the DCM, the military attachï¿½, and I guess, maybe the AID director and-

Q: Do you select who . . .

COON: No, it was largely determined by protocol for the first three or four on the list. The president's military aide, who escorted me, told me afterward on several occasions, that he'd never had an ambassador that reviewed the guard any better than I did. [Laughter] Obviously, it was a new experience for him, too. I was the first woman ambassador, of course.

Q: Indeed. Do you walk up and down in front of them, or do they file before you?

COON: No, no, you walk down. You just walk down the front rank. The military have these down to well-established routines.

Q: Was there music? Martial music?

COON: I think that both national anthems were played.

Q: What did you say to the president, or he say to you?

COON: It was the acting president, after the assassination of President Zia.

So I presented my credentials to acting president Abdus Sattar, because under the Bangladeshi constitution at the time, the vice president did not succeed to the presidency, he became acting president. There had to be an election for the presidency within, I think, a hundred and eighty days, although I may be fuzzy on my constitutional history.

I think I was the first ambassador to present my credentials to him; I was either the first or second. He was apparently-he was a man of very, very few words. And apparently he was not at ease with-or his staff, at any rate, were a little bit worried. He was a very elderly man, and his health was not very good. In fact, he had been in the hospital on the day Zia was assassinated. So that his staff was a little uncertain.

I had very carefully memorized about a paragraph, and his staff suggested that we just say a very few words to each other. I limited it to about two or three sentences. I gave him my credentials, and then we sat down for a picture and chatted informally.

Q: What in the world do you say at a time like that? When you were chatting informally? Just, "This is a beautiful country," even though your feet are sticking in the lawn?

COON: I think we did probably talk about the weather. I had the great good fortune of having previously visited Bangladesh on several occasions. This was not common to many ambassadors that came there. In fact, I could say I had been there first over twenty years ago, so we made a little bit of none too sprightly conversation, though I was told afterward that the president was perceived to be positively animated. [Laughter]

Q: You'd hate to see him when he wasn't. So you got through it with a flourish.

COON: Then we went back to the house where Carl was waiting, and all had champagne with the chief of protocol.

The following day I made my first public entry into the diplomatic corps of Dhaka. It's a story I love to use even now with junior officers, when I talk to the entering officer course on lessons of humility for us all, including ambassadors. It was a large occasion for Bangladesh. They were opening their first ceramics factory, a massive AID project and a very large factory. The president was cutting the ribbon, and the diplomatic corps were all supposed to dance in attendance.

So I went out, flag flying, and met my colleagues. I'd met one or two of them before, but this was my first official appearance. We sat outside the front gate of the factory and listened to a large number of speeches in Bengali, and I was really feeling pretty good, sitting there in the front row with the diplomats. The president finally got up and made his speech. He was handed the scissors and he cut the ribbon and he escorted the diplomats onto the floor of the factory.

I had been rather unclear about what ceramic factories make. I had somehow thought that it was either petri dishes or those things on telephone poles. I wasn't quite sure. But it became quite apparent as the diplomatic corps marched perfectly straight-faced through what must have been about three acres of toilet bowls and urinals. It was a lesson in humility. [Hearty laughter]

Q: I should say. Well, necessary, necessary.

COON: Necessary for all of us. So now I was officially on board in Bangladesh. My DCM had carried over from the previous ambassador and was a very competent officer. This was early August. He was going to leave in late September, when my new DCM came on board, whom I had selected for the job.

My first initial steps were to learn what the totality of the mission was about, how they saw their role, and where they were going in their various sections. I'm sure there are a variety of ways to do this. The way that I chose was initially to ask each agency and section chief to give me two papers; one on their objectives and what they hoped to accomplish within the next nine months up until April, and the other was, what were their longer term objectives, and where would they like to be-or where would their agency or the element of the mission-what would they like to accomplish in the next five years. The latter was obviously more difficult for everybody because, as you well know, in the Foreign Service we're on two- or three-year tours of duty, and very seldom stretch our minds beyond that particular period of time.

I suspect there was a fair amount of struggle over this exercise, but I found it very useful in ascertaining how clearly elements of the staff were thinking in terms of their objectives and their goals and how would they go about getting where they wanted to get. It was also very useful in seeing how various elements of the mission interacted with each other. For example, if the number one goal of the USIS director was to either rent, lease, or build a new cultural center-which in fact was the case and was wholly justified-and this didn't appear on the admin officer's list at all, I knew that there was an issue of coordination here. So that it helped not only in finding out how various elements were looking ahead, but how they articulated with each other.

Then of course I did the usual walk-through of all elements of the mission, from the USIS library to the AID mission to the attachï¿½ office, the GSO section, which is normal. And not immediately, but within two or three weeks, I started a series of intensive briefings with AID, which was the major element of the mission in Bangladesh and was our major program in Bangladesh. With each of the four divisions in AID, I would have a briefing with the AID director and the American AID staff in the morning, I would lunch with the AID staff of a particular division and their American contractors. In the evening the director would put on a function for me, for the division, the contractors, and their key Bangladeshi contacts from all of the ministries. So that I felt that by the end of a day-fairly exhausting day-I would have a fairly good handle on each element of the AID program and would at least have been exposed to the major players.

There are really two halves to an ambassador's life at this point. One is the internal, getting on top of your mission and what they're doing, and establishing yourself as the leader of the mission. And the second half of your life, which has to go on, obviously, parallel, and is equally if not more important, is your development of external contacts with the government of Bangladesh and with your colleagues in the diplomatic corps. There is, of course, a fairly well-ordered pattern to that, that you are expected to call on your colleagues in the diplomatic corps and on selected ministers and senior government officials in the Bangladesh government. That went, I think, quite smoothly. It takes longer than you think it's going to take, inevitably.

At some point in late August there was some sort of civil disturbance downtown, so I couldn't go into the embassy in the city. We had a regular pattern that we worked out for riots and civil disturbances. I think I managed to make five calls that particular day on my colleagues who lived out in the suburban area where I lived. We fortunately had enough advance notice so my secretary had made arrangements for my calls. I got very tired of tea that day.

The issue inevitably arises, how did my mission, the Bangladesh government, and my colleagues in the diplomatic corps respond to the new American ambassador in the form of a woman? I think without question there was an enormous amount of just plain curiosity all around. I suspect that within my own mission, particularly among some of the older men, probably in the AID mission, there was a very considerable skepticism about the wisdom of the United States government. Among my colleagues in the diplomatic corps, I heard afterward that in fact there was very considerable skepticism among several of the Western European ambassadors. Not, interestingly enough, the Asians. Again, questioning the wisdom of the United States government in sending a woman to a Muslim country. I think I can safely say that within a very few months, most of the people who were skeptical at the beginning were coming around to me to consult on various aspects of the political situation.

With the Bangladesh government, so far as I was able to ascertain, and obviously I can't be 100 percent certain of this, I did not sense any problems at all. The foreign minister was extremely gracious; the president, of course; the finance minister; other key members of the government, I think, accepted me as the American ambassador, and it did not appear to be an issue.

I've often said that in South Asia, at any rate-I don't know about other parts of the world-I think in many ways a Western woman is sort of a third sex. They don't expect you to conform to their social mores. You aren't a part of that culture. You're obviously still a woman but you're something outside of their cultural context. So I think it was perhaps not surprising that I got probably more raised eyebrows from my Western European colleagues than I did from Asians.

Q: Did it bother you? Did you have a feeling that, "I'm on trial now, and all eyes are on me, and I'd better not make a misstep," or did you just sort of figure, "Well, I know what I'm doing."

COON: I think it was more of the latter. By the time I got to Dhaka I knew South Asia pretty well. I had visited Bangladesh on several occasions, the first one as far back as 1957, while some of my contacts in the Bangladesh government were still in graduate school, so I think I was reasonably confident in my knowledge of the local situation. Although obviously the role is different than when you're either a junior officer or when you're a visiting fireman from Washington. But I don't think I felt that I was on trial, particularly.

I felt then and throughout my tour that, by virtue of being a woman and the American ambassador, I was far from being invisible. I was obviously a conspicuous figure in the community. When there would be a function of some sort, like at this ceramic factory, being covered by Bangladeshi television, almost inevitably the TV clip that evening would zero in at some point on me in the diplomatic corps, or the Saudi ambassador, or both. The Saudi ambassador because he wore Arab clothes, and Saudi Arabia was also a significant aid donor to Bangladesh, and me because I obviously was different from the other ambassadors and represented the United States. There was no point in my tour in Bangladesh when I did not feel that I was a public figure, and I think perhaps the biggest difference between any other job in the embassy and being the ambassador is that as ambassador you are a public figure all the time.

Q: You can't let down at all, I suppose. You're always on parade.

COON: You're always visible to either your own community or the Bangladeshi community. Now this doesn't mean you go around acting like a stuffed shirt, but you're conscious of the fact that when you're doing your laps in the swimming pool, there are two or three of the wives nudging each other and saying, "There's the ambassador." Not to speak of diplomatic receptions or anything like that, where one expects it.

Q: And you're more on display than if you were the ambassador's wife?

COON: I think so. Because in some ways I was, you know, the two of them wrapped up together to the distaff side of the community. To pursue that subject just briefly, there was an enormous amount of curiosity on the distaff side, which I was not really conscious of. When my new DCM came, his wife, who is a marvelous person and had very good antenna with respect to the community, suggested that I speak to the American Woman's Club. We talked about what I would speak about, and I was going to talk about US policy toward Bangladesh, and finally she said, "You know, what they really want to know about is you."

And so I got up and gave an autobiographical account, slightly embarrassed by this, but it obviously was something they were just inordinately curious about: how I got there.

Q: Did you ever feel, when you were doing your daily rounds out there, that you were not only doing them for yourself, but you were doing them for other women? That's a comment many of the ambassadors have said to me. They felt a burden, that they had to be just as good as they could be because they were striking a blow for women. Did you ever feel that?

COON: You know, in the beginning, in the first year, at least, while I was there, I was asked by several women's organizations to speak. I think maybe I spoke to one, but I consciously made a decision that it was important to be seen as the American ambassador and not the woman ambassador. So that I did not, the first year and a half, take much of a role with women's organizations, for example.

And I didn't make this decision lightly. I got together the professional women of the embassy-there were several professional women in AID, USIS, and the embassy, some of which had been there longer and had very good contacts in the community, both men and women-and we talked about it. They concurred that it was important that I be seen as the American ambassador and not a woman ambassador. We actually had a discussion on this point.

Now I think where it hit me-I think I realized, not immediately, but fairly early on, the symbolic import for women of my being there. It was something that continued throughout my tour there, and I found in many ways quite touching. One of the first receptions given for me was a reception by the DCM for embassy staff, including the Foreign Service Nationals and their wives. Many of the wives followed their husbands and were very shy. In retrospect, I suspect that many of them would not have come if they hadn't been curious about this new phenomenon. And repeatedly, throughout the evening, as I stood in the reception line, I would shake hands with Mr. So-and-so, the agricultural assistant in AID, and his wife then would take my hand and almost whisper in my ear, "We're so glad you're here."

This became almost a pattern at the early receptions, that many Bangladeshi women-it wasn't just one an evening-would repeat this: "We're so glad you're here." "It's wonderful to have you here." "I'm glad the Americans sent you." That kind of thing.

Q: Which you know they would never have said to a man.

COON: No, that was strictly the women to me. And I realized that I had a symbolic value, and this continued for the three years.

Q: So it had a big impact.

COON: So I think without question, it had a significant symbolic impact on half the population, if you will. My last year there, when I was well established, I did consciously accept more invitations from women's groups. Not a lot, but more.

Q: No, I see your point. I should think it would be very important to make it seem that this was such a-not an ordinary event but, "I am not to be treated any differently than a man." And make it seem as though, "of course, this is the way we do things."

COON: It's in the normal course of events. That's right.

Q: Would make probably a bigger impact, I should think. Provided you carry through and do the job well, which we know in your case, you did.

COON: Right up to the final receptions I would get these very quiet comments, and in some very far corners of the country where I traveled. Because I had appeared so much on television at all these functions the government televises, apparently my general recognition was very, very high.

Q: All over the country?

COON: Pretty widely.

Q: They have access to TVs? Well, obviously they must, but is it in the corner stores or-

COON: When I say recognition, I don't mean down to the poorest, landless laborer; I don't mean that. I do remember just before I left Bangladesh, I was on a tour with the president, a helicopter tour of flooded areas in north Bengal. I was sitting under a tree, looking fairly disreputable, it being August and a very hot day, and I was in salwarkemeez, because climbing on and off helicopters was not something you did lightly in a skirt. And I noticed two Bengali men, young teachers. I was sitting near a school, and two young teachers were standing there whispering to each other, and one of them finally came up and said, "Aren't you the American ambassador?" Because they'd apparently seen me on television. And this was a fairly distant corner.

Q: Getting the message out, so to speak. How large was your staff?

COON: We had about eighty-five what we called direct-hire Americans on the payroll. About thirty-five in AID mission, and the rest in the embassy, USIS, the attachï¿½ office, agricultural attachï¿½.

Q: Did you have a defense attachï¿½?

COON: Defense attachï¿½.

Q: How many Marines?

COON: I guess five, with a Gunny.

Q: You said that you inherited a DCM who then subsequently left. And you had selected a new one. Could you tell me a little bit about him? How you selected him? What criteria you used?

COON: Being a political cone officer-an officer with a lot of political background and a South Asian background-I felt it was less important for the DCM to have a South Asian background, but I would like to have somebody who had a strong economic background, and if possible, someone who had been an economic officer in some part of the developing world, who had worked with an AID mission.

Before I went out, I interviewed a number of candidates, some of whom were interested in the job, and some of whom were appalled at the prospect of going to Bangladesh. I finally found someone who was in the senior seminar, named Carl Schmidt, who had a good reputation as an economic officer. He was an Eastern European specialist and had served quite widely in Eastern Europe and in EB, the economic bureau, and had been office director for Eastern European Affairs. I think the last thing Carl had ever considered was going to Bangladesh, but we hit it off quite nicely in the interview.

He was very uncertain about the reaction of his wife, so I invited them to come over and have drinks with me. We had a very good evening, and his wife, who, I think, at first was somewhat aghast at the prospect, warmed to the idea, and they agreed to come out.

I think it was probably the best decision I ever made, after the decision to marry my husband, anyway. [Laughter] And not a wholly dissimilar relationship, because the relationship between the ambassador and the DCM is a very close relationship. It worked out from my point of view, and I hope from Carl's, extraordinarily well. He brought skills that I think complemented my skills. He was a good manager. He was keenly interested in junior officers, which I feel is a very important thing. We had several junior officers and a good rotation program.

He had the economic background, although as I look back on it, that was probably less important than his managerial skills. A DCM should not be the economic counselor; the DCM should be the embassy manager. I think I visualized that one a little bit wrong. I think Carl handled the situation extremely well, where he was not the economic counselor, which is precisely what he should not have been.

On the other hand, he had insights into, particularly, EB and to economic issues that were useful. So it was, from my point of view, a very happy relationship, and I think it must have been happy enough for him so that he extended a third year.

Q: Also, it seems to me you were lucky in that his wife turned out to be-

COON: His wife turned out to be just marvelous.

Q: Because there is a very definite role, as you yourself know, having done it more than once: the DCM's wife.

COON: She was a very self-sufficient and independent person who had a large number of interests of her own, both music and writing. She was very interested in Bangladeshi society, made a lot of Bangladeshi friends. But she was not about to become president of the woman's club or go on the school board. Nor was she going to be my staff aide or something like that. We had a respectful relationship. I think I understood her position because I had a not dissimilar position vis-ï¿½-vis Ambassador Laise in Kathmandu. On the other hand, Rika had very good antenna in the community and could alert me to things, to potential problems, and usually had very good advice. So that was a very, very, happy relationship for me.

Q: Did you see her on a specific time schedule?

COON: No, I did not. No, she was not a member of my staff, and I respected her for it. But when something came up, why . . . And we saw each other. We lived not very far apart, and if there was something I needed to talk to Carl about, I'd drop by, and chat with her, too. They would, of course, come by the residence.

Q: It's really a key relationship, isn't it?

COON: Absolute key relationship, to have that. Carl also was a person who had a lot of quiet confidence in his own abilities, his own judgment. I respected his judgment, and he could come in and close the door and say, "I think you ought to do that. I think that particular idea of yours"-he put it much more tactfully than this, but anyway-"is really off the wall."

And if there's anything an ambassador needs, it's a candid DCM that will also keep them from misjudgments and missteps, because very few people in a mission overseas will tell the emperor that he has no clothes. You badly need it.

Q: Also, if there is bickering or hard feelings between the two top people, morale goes right to pot.

COON: That's an impossible situation. That's terrible. People then drive a wedge between the ambassador and the DCM. Now I obviously commuted to Kathmandu every couple of months to see my husband, and it was a wonderful feeling to get on that plane. Carl would almost always drive out to the airport, because we'd have last minute things to talk about, and I would get on that plane and not have a worry in the world about my mission. That's the best thing that can happen to an ambassador: to know that you've left it in perfectly good hands, and there isn't anything to worry about. And you can focus on having a nice time in Nepal.

Q: How often did you have your staff and country team meetings?

COON: We had country team meetings every week. That was another thing that I quite consciously did. When I first arrived at post, the intent of the old DCM was to just continue with the meeting pattern which had existed. I had enormous regard for my predecessor, but I wasn't him. My style is different. I made clear that I would not establish a new meeting pattern until my new DCM arrived. When he arrived, then we would discuss and establish what would be the meeting pattern which suited our style and method of operation.

Q: You had obviously worked out all of these things before you got there, hadn't you?

COON: Well, you think about it. You think about how you're going to-or at least you should-approach the new job, because you don't have a whole lot of time. You've got to get on top of things fast.

Q: Did the ambassador course help you much?

COON: I think it had some useful ideas. And then I deliberately talked to several people in Washington that had been ambassadors about how they approached their initial period at post.

Q: With these meetings, did you always sit in the same place?

COON: I think in the country team meeting, yes. I had a chair that was positioned next to a telephone, so I did tend to sit in the same place. I think I'd do that differently now, at a different stage of my life. Ultimately- I don't remember exactly when I established this pattern, but my meeting pattern fell into what I called a political cell meeting, in which I had my political officers, obviously the DCM, economic officer, defense attachï¿½, and usually the USIS, on Monday mornings. We would get together and talk a little bit about the agenda for the week, what areas we felt we needed more information, what might happen, what people were working on in terms of reporting. It was useful to have the economic officer in on that, even though it was a political cell meeting, because he could contribute, and it was a fairly conscious effort to try to build bridges among the various elements of the mission that were doing the reporting.

Q: Were there problems within different sections when you got there?

COON: There had been a lot of turnover that summer. We had a new admin officer, new political counselor, a new DCM, a new ambassador, a new defense attachï¿½, a new second political officer. Over half the embassy had turned over that summer. I'd been in enough missions where there had been poor communication among various sections, so that was one of my goals. I think that one worked fairly well. I don't think I ever worked out nearly as successfully a relationship between the political and the economic section. I don't think there was competition, but there wasn't enough communication, as I see retrospectively.

And the other little meeting I had was a meeting on Friday afternoons with the economists from AID and my own embassy economic section. This was not a decision or policy meeting so the AID director was not there. It was a combination of purposes. One was to educate me on the major economic and AID issues, the substance of issues. The second purpose of this, and it was quite an up-front purpose, was to make sure that the AID economists and the embassy economists were talking to each other, and were, again, not in a competitive relationship, because I had seen too many embassies where the AID economists and the embassy economists were absolutely at daggers points.

That one worked out on both fronts; the education of the ambassador. It also, It, frankly, gave me an entree at a lower level into AID, which kept me better informed than I might always have been through the hierarchy, since AID directors tend to tell ambassadors what they want to tell ambassadors. So that was also useful in that respect. I don't think we ever had a competitive relationship between the embassy and AID on the economic front.

Q: That's very good, and rare. It seems to be a continuing problem.

COON: It's a continuing problem, and the problem is exacerbated by the fact that AID had two first-class economists, and we had an economic officer who was a reasonably good officer, but he was much stronger on the commercial side, and we had a junior officer in the section, so the weight was on AID's side. I needed to be sure that the two were talking to each other.

Q: You've mentioned the four areas in which AID operated. Would you tell me about those?

COON: There had been an AID program for Pakistan before Bangladesh broke away. At the time of the war in '71, the branch AID office in East Pakistan was evacuated. After the war was over, and it took us some months to recognize Bangladesh, AID sent out-and to this day I'd love to know the history of that-a handful of rather young officers in their late '20s and early '30s. AID was largely a relief operation at that point. In '72 and '73-literally, Bangladesh's food reserves were on the high seas, in American bottoms bringing out PL 480 wheat.

By '73 or '4, at least '74, the young AID officers were attempting to move from what was much too much a relief operation to begin to plot a strategy for food production and distribution. They must have been a fairly creative little cadre. Their strategy was put into place with AID and the World Bank, and really went into gear when Zia came into office. My dates may be a little off here-from '75 on. It was a program which focused heavily on increased agricultural production by high-yield variety seeds, irrigation during the dry season, fertilizer, and farm gate prices which would provide an incentive. The World Bank invested very, very heavily in storage facilities in the country, because the notion was that you would set a floor price, and if the market price for rice dropped below that floor, the government would go into the market and buy and store the grain. Then during the lean season, when the price rose too high-and there was a trigger price-the government would put grain on the market to moderate the price swings. The thinking in the mid-'70s was extremely sound, in that Bangladesh never went the way of the African countries where agricultural prices were almost deliberately suppressed to keep the urban dwellers happy, and agricultural production went down.

So by the time I got there, agricultural production was increasing. There was an increased use of high-yield varieties, use of tube wells and fertilizer. The storage facilities had gone up.

So to get back to your original question, our thrust was in agriculture. We supported agricultural research, which really meant adaptation of rice and wheat that were developed in the Philippines and Mexico to Bangladeshi conditions. We were heavily into fertilizer, both fertilizer imports and distribution, and the building of fertilizer warehouses very widely throughout the country. We were using our role in fertilizer distribution and imports to privatize distribution, which had been a government monopoly. That was one of our more successful programs, privatizing fertilizer distribution. So that was a major thrust in agriculture.

We also had a significant population program, and that was the second major thrust of our AID program.

We supported a number of voluntary sterilization private groups in Bangladesh, which did a very good job.

Q: Sterilization of men?

COON: Yes, but mostly women. We heavily subsidized commercial marketing of contraceptives, and we carefully monitored the family planning program, and not only our role, but the whole family planning program. We wanted to assure that there was no element of coercion, and that quality control was maintained, particularly on sterilizations, so that you didn't have a large number of deaths and infection and that sort of thing.

Q: Did you use the same sort of incentives that were used in India to induce people to go in for sterilization?

COON: No, we did not use incentives because that is not part of our policy, to provide incentives for sterilization. We did provide transportation money-or the government provided and we reimbursed them to some extent-transportation money if they had to come from the village to the center. We reimbursed the government for a new sari for the women or a new lungi for the man, on grounds-and I think very sound grounds-that you reduce the possibility of infection if you go home in a clean garment.

Q: Were there also tubal ligatures?

COON: Yes, they were both done, male and female, but female sterilization was going up much faster than male.

Q: Is that so? The women preferred that, or do you think their husbands preferred that?

COON: I think there probably was a reluctance among men, but there was a tremendous demand among women-the issue in Bangladesh when I was there was not motivation; it was meeting the demand.

Q: They could see nothing ahead but one baby after another after another, and you can't feed the ones you've got.

COON: The average Bangladeshi woman was having something like fourteen pregnancies at this point. I can't cite the figure, but both female and infant mortality were just appalling. We also, later on, got into some work in women's and children's health.

We also had an active rural electrification program, which supported in many ways the agricultural program, because it made available electricity for tube wells and also provided power for small village industry; rice mills, and that sort of thing. That was an extremely popular program, being managed by an American contractor, the National Rural Electrification Cooperatives of America-NRECA.

Q: The health care for the women and the babies, wellness clinics and that sort of thing, did that fall under the population-

COON: It was health and population division, and then of course, we had a major food import program known as PL 480. We were importing three or four hundred thousand tons a year, mostly wheat.

Q: The soil, as I understand it, is quite rich in Bangladesh.

COON: Oh, it's an extremely fertile country. You can get three crops a year if you have water. Not three rice crops.

Q: The problem is the monsoons, and the lack of rain, and too much rain?

COON: The problem is population pressure. It's a hundred million people in an area the size of Wisconsin. Just enormous population pressure. Later in my tour of duty, we moved into programs in rural credit and banking reform. Credit was the other constraint on agriculture. We were trying to help the Bangladeshis, through the banking system, to establish rural credit arrangements that would reach even very small farmers. So they could get credit to buy seed and fertilizer and a tube well.

Q: The idea being to help them become more self-sufficient, of course. But before you can do that you've got to get them fed, I suppose. The country has been at war so much it seems to me there can't have been very much productivity.

COON: Well, the curve was a very encouraging one. Agricultural production was increasing at about 3 percent a year, from around 1976 to when I left in '84. Which is no small accomplishment. Wheat production had gone from about a hundred thousand tons in 1970-wheat is a winter crop and relatively newly introduced into Bangladesh-went from about a hundred thousand tons in 1970 to about 1.2 million the year I left. They were making significant progress, and they are very close to self-sufficiency in rice, if they haven't achieved it yet. I'm not sure.

Now, there are good years and bad years. When I say 3 percent a year, some years it was a little more, some years it was less. And wheat, I understand, now is up to 1.4, 1.6 million tons, something like that.

Q: There is quite a problem there with people fleeing either to Pakistan or to India, isn't there, and causing difficulties between the three governments?

COON: There was a relatively small group of people, called Biharis, Muslims who migrated from the Hindi-speaking areas or the Urdu-speaking areas of India to Bangladesh in 1947 and thereafter. They had tended to prosper rather more under the Pakistani regime and had tended to side with the Pakistanis at the time of the '71 war, so they were not very popular. There were a few hundred thousand. Some left right after the war, and there was increasing pressure while I was there to have family reunification. They were agitating to go to Pakistan. The Pakistanis weren't so keen on having them. Bangladeshis found it quite acceptable for them to leave, put no barriers in their way. It was one of those tragic aftermaths of the flow of people in the subcontinent, '47 and '71.

Then there has been some migration, since the late 19th century, of Bengalis from both West Bengal and what is now Bangladesh into the much less heavily populated areas of northeast India, particular Assam and Tripura. That had probably continued at least up to '71. The point of view of the Bangladesh government-who had reached an agreement with Mrs. Gandhi that any that arrived before '71, legally or illegally, would not be forced back-the Bangladesh government's position was that Bangladeshis had not gone to Assam since 1971. The Indian government's position was somewhat at variance with this.

When there were very severe riots in Assam in 1982, which were ethnic riots in part, between native Assamese and Bengalis, regardless of their origin, there was a certain amount of pressure on the Indian government from the local government, the politics of Assam interacted with the politics of India, to attempt to restrict what the Indians felt to be a continuing influx of Bangladeshis. I suspect that the Indian government, or the Assamese particularly, probably overstated the influx, and the Bangladeshis perhaps overlooked the possibility that some had crossed the border. I don't think it was a major hemorrhage. Now if there were ever a breakdown in Bangladesh, or a severe famine, that would be something else again.

Q: Is that one of things that led to India's deciding to put up a fence?

COON: That's right, that was the issue of the fence. The Indians, really in response to political pressures from Assam, announced that they were going to put up a fence around Bangladesh. The Bangladeshis took this-I didn't fully understand the Bangladeshi reaction. Educated Bangladeshis found this really wholly unacceptable, very humiliating. They protested vigorously. I don't think it was that any of the educated Bangladeshis planned to emigrate to Assam, but they just found it a very humiliating thing.

I confess that it seemed to me the likelihood of an effective fence actually being put around Bangladesh was-

Q: Of barbed wire, wasn't it?

COON: It would have raised the price of wire clippers in most Bangladeshi bazaars, but it wouldn't do much else. Because there's a great deal of smuggling that goes along across that border. Q: How would they police it?

COON: That's another good question. Anyway, by the time I left, the fence issue had largely died down. The Indians had put up a couple of posts. I think Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had more success in reaching an accommodation with the Assamese on the political issues that were agitating the Assamese. As far as I know, that issue has died down.

Q: A terrific expense for absolutely no results.

COON: Oh, colossal. It would have been a colossal expense.

Q: I know the Russians were there, but they don't get along too well with the Bangladeshi, do they?

COON: No. There's a large Russian embassy in Dhaka. The Russians had been very supportive of Bangladeshi independence and of the Indian role in Bangladesh, but by the mid-'70s, when the Bangladeshis began to distance themselves a little bit from the Indians, the Bangladeshis also distanced themselves a little from the Russians, and cultivated much closer relations with the Chinese as an offset. This is a fairly normal pattern in the subcontinent, that the smaller countries around India tend to cultivate relations with large countries other than the Soviets.

Q: Why? They're afraid of the Soviets?

COON: No, they're afraid of India, and India and the Soviet Union are very close. So there was a very large Russian Embassy there that was in many ways a carry-over from the earlier days of Bangladesh. There was a large Indian High Commission there too, and a Pakistani Embassy. The Bangladeshis and the Pakistanis had reestablished relations and have very good relations now. The Chinese presence-and the Chinese had provided both economic and substantial military aid to the Bangladeshis. The usual west European contingent, including the British, of course, because it was a commonwealth country. The Australians and Canadians were quite important because they were also food donors, and they, for the most part, had very able high commissioners there.

Q: So you had a large diplomatic community?

COON: It wasn't large. I think it ran about thirty-five or forty, something like that.

Q: And you had cordial relations with all of them, including the Russians?

COON: Yes. I wouldn't say the Russian ambassador and I were particularly intimate. The Russian ambassador was-when I first got there the Romanian was dean of the corps, but he stayed only about a year, and then the Russian ambassador became dean of the corps. He left almost exactly the same time I did after about eight years in Bangladesh, each one of which I think he loathed progressively more. It was quite apparent that he desperately wanted a transfer and was not getting it, and he finally was retired out of Bangladesh. I somewhat sympathize with Gorbachev's effort on the vodka front. As I look back on my Russian colleague, it was a clear case of alcoholism.

Q: Really? I found a very interesting news report on two diplomats, two Russian diplomats being detained while attempting to burn five hundred and eighty-eight rolls of movie films. What was all that about?

COON: What's the date on that?

Q: April 6, 1982.

COON: That was not long after the coup. The military government took over, and to this day, I'm not quite sure what they were up to, but it may have been fairly harmless. They were getting rid of a whole lot of-you know, they import in an awful lot of movies for the Russian community themselves. But it was the most ham-handed sort of thing. The Bangladeshis stumbled across them and attributed the most dire motives to them, it being within about two weeks of the coup. You know, sometimes we think the Russians are twelve feet tall, and they aren't. They can be just as ham-handed as can be. What kind of film these people were burning, I don't know, and why they chose to go out in the countryside and do it, and then get picked up by the police . . .

Q: Oh, they went out in the countryside to do this?

COON: They went outside of Dhaka, yes. It was very peculiar. They were invited to leave. The Russians, of course, had a network into the left wing. There were a variety of small left-wing parties in Bangladesh, of generally not a great deal of strength or significance. It was very clear that the Russians were subsidizing them. Again, they didn't even cover their tracks terribly well. And then in December of '83, there was some student unrest, led by some of the left-wing students, and the government just plain got fed-up and asked fifteen Soviets to leave. For a very small-what the Bangladeshis perceive to be a small and weak country, that was quite a courageous act on their part. Q: I should say. Did they go?

COON: Yes. They were quietly replaced over the next several months. Of course, in a situation like that, where there's a conspiratorial explanation for every act, why, we were either blamed or credited with putting the Bangladeshis up to it. In fact we had nothing to do with it. [Laughter] I can't say we were sad to see it happen.

Q: You don't realize how much power you're credited with until you hear all this gossip about what the US has done.

COON: Oh, yes. We're credited with a great deal more than we do.

Q: What did you perceive as the most important part of your mission? The AID function?

COON: Yes, I think the major relationship really was the AID relationship. The totality of our aid ran to perhaps a hundred and eighty million dollars a year, about half of it development assistance and about half food aid. Some years it ran over two hundred million. We used the food aid for developmental purposes. Our objectives included an interest in stability in Bangladesh. It was certainly not in our interest to have a breakdown, for either political or economic reasons. We had an interest in minimizing friction and encouraging good relations among countries of the subcontinent, which in Dhaka's perspective really meant the relationship between Bangladesh and India. We did not have a stake in bad relations between Bangladesh and India, and did not in any way attempt to capitalize on them, which would have been very easy to do, because the Bangladeshis were not reluctant to attempt to seek our support in their disputes with India. And so a fair amount of my mission was staying out of the middle.

Q: Did you see the president very often? That would be Hossain Mohammad Ershad most of the time you were there?

COON: I saw him fairly frequently. To get back to this earlier-I won't leave this question of Ershad, but I'll come to it a little bit later. The first sort of diplomatic challenge I had-even before I arrived, an issue had arisen that was causing very, very bad tempers on both sides of the border, India and Bangladesh. This was the issue of sovereignty over an island which was emerging in the Bay of Bengal at just about the junction of the India and Bangladesh borders in southwestern Bangladesh, known as Talliputti Island by the Bangladeshis, and South Moor Island by the Indians.

Bangladesh is one of the few countries that is growing both geographically as well as in population, as all that good topsoil washes down from Nepal. Islands do emerge, and islands disappear. This island had emerged over the previous few years. It was a foot and a half above high tide, or something like that. It wasn't a biggie, nobody lived on it yet, although Bengalis do move on to these islands very, very quickly as they emerge, well before they should.

Q: Don't they get drowned?

COON: This is what happens. You read about storms in the Bay of Bengal and ten thousand people drowning-it's because they move onto this very low ground on these emerging islands too soon. The island became a cause celebre with the Bangladeshis. The Indians sent a ship and a landing party and planted their flag firmly on Talliputti, and the Bangladeshis were in a high dudgeon about this when I arrived. It began to heat up after I arrived, and I had to find ways to convey our view that this kind of friction-and it really looked as if there might even be a confrontation-was clearly a loser for the Bangladeshi. So I had to find ways to convey my views to various elements of the government, that we hoped that they would find ways to tamp this down and reach an amicable solution, or at least agree on a process that might lead to a solution. That's when you realize that a government is a very complicated thing. Particularly in Bangladesh, you don't just go in and talk to the foreign minister, because the foreign minister may have little influence with the military, for example, and you don't know what the military is doing. The president was a very elderly man at the time. The government was just recovering from the disarray which was quite natural after the assassination of President Zia, who had been a very strong leader. So I had to find ways, and that is when it comes home to you very, very quickly that you've got to establish your network of contacts throughout the government. And my network-this was within the first couple of weeks-was not well-established at the time. So it was perhaps more of a lesson to me than anything else. That was the first challenge.

The second challenge, virtually simultaneously, was the arrival of Ambassador Kirkpatrick from the United Nations. This was about ten days after I'd presented my credentials. Jeane Kirkpatrick came out with a small party. She was making a swing through South Asia, to stop at the various South Asian capitals, countries with which she is going to be dealing in the U.N. This was the first cabinet-level visitor Bangladesh had since, I think, Henry Kissinger in about 1974, and they were really excited and turned out for it.

And we had to very quickly arrange her program, including the logistics. She was traveling, of course, with security. She stayed at the residence-and I had just barely moved in myself-with her husband and her security people.

I remember one lovely moment when the two of us were walking through the long vaulted corridor of the presidential palace to call on the president, and she turned to me and she said, "I'll bet this is the first time two women ambassadors have ever called on the president of Bangladesh." [Laughter]

And I said, "I'll bet it is."

That visit went very well.

The constitution required an election, so we very quickly had to focus on the election campaign. The earliest fencing in September being about whether or not the opposition parties would participate in the election, and the president and the government wanted the opposition parties because it was as much an exercise in legitimacy as it was anything else. So there was a great deal of fencing and activity by the various political parties. By late October or November, there were already rumors of disenchantment in the military with the way the civilian government was conducting its business.

I found ways of conveying our preference for the electoral and representative process, and the election went off, really, without a hitch. It went off reasonably well and Sattar was reelected in what I think was a reasonably fair election.

Q: Did we have any observers there?

COON: Just the embassy. Just ourselves.

Q: Nobody at the polls the way they were in Manila?

COON: No, no. It was a rather curious election because the major opposition candidate, a man named Kamal Hussein was running on an Awami League ticket, and the Awami League put up posters everywhere with the founder of the Awami League and father of the country, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, on the posters in a large picture, and Kamal Hussein hardly featured. Sheik Mujibur, of course, had been assassinated in '74. The government party likewise put up posters with large pictures of former President Zia, who had been killed the previous May, and a small photo of their candidate, Acting President Sattar, down in the corner. So you began to wonder if it was a contest between two deceased leaders.

After the polls closed, I asked my cook who he'd voted for, and he looked at me in total surprise and said, "President Zia, of course." [Laughter]

Q: Was he aware that Zia was dead?

COON: Yes, he was aware, but he was voting for what Zia stood for, as far as he was concerned, I think.

An election in Bangladesh, as anywhere in the subcontinent, is a colorful event. A large proportion of the population is illiterate so that the use of symbols becomes very important. Each party has a symbol, and popularizing a symbol becomes one of the major activities in an election. As I recall the Awami League's symbol was a country boat, and they would build these huge replicas of boats that would stretch all the way across streets, and another party-I think it was the government party-was a sheaf of rice, and there would be these enormous replicas of sheaves of rice.

During this period, what you have to do as an ambassador is stay out of the limelight so that you are not identified with a political party in an election. Not always easy.

Q: No, I'm sure they're doing everything they can to pull you in on one side or the other.

COON: That's right. Just before the election, the president invited me down to open the third generator of what had been an American AID project, a hydroelectric project. It took some deft footwork to stay out of the political rally.

Q: You did go for the opening?

COON: Yes, and it was appropriate to go to the opening, because it had been an American AID project. The third generator actually was not an American project, but it was very much identified with us, and the dam and the early hydroelectric work had been an American project.

So that takes us through the election. After the election, there were high expectations that once the president was elected, was confirmed in office, he would reshuffle his cabinet. Particularly the donor countries were really sort of lying in wait to try and get some decisions made by the government on various economic policies. Unfortunately, the president did not choose to reshuffle his cabinet very substantially, and we went into the winter with a situation where the harvest was not terribly good, and the price of rice from January on began to rise steadily. The price of rice is politics in Bangladesh; that is the heart of it all. Decisions did not come readily.

There was clearly increasing frustration, both in the government, and particularly in the military, and it certainly was widely believed that it was a matter of time before the military moved. Bangladesh has something of a tradition of military intervention, and Pakistan before it. Pardon?

Q: I just wanted to ask you if corruption was an issue.

COON: Corruption was a very major issue.

Q: With reason, do you think?

COON: I have found, Ann, probably the most difficult thing in the developing world is to have a yardstick to measure corruption. Whether objective corruption is the issue, or people's perception of corruption is the more important issue. So that I find it very difficult to answer that question. Certainly the perception was that corruption was a serious problem that was increasing.

Q: Things don't get done and somebody says, "So-and-so's hand's in the cookie jar or it would get done," even though there may be a million reasons why-

COON: Yes. There's always a certain level of corruption almost built into the system. When this rises to a point where it becomes an issue, or when it is perceived to have risen to a point where it becomes an issue, is a very, very hard thing to measure, I think.I learned a lesson very early on as a junior officer in Karachi, where the conventional wisdom, which I never doubted from my circle of friends, was that the president of Pakistan-in fact the man who led the first coup before the Ayub coup, a man named Iskander Mirza-had Swiss bank accounts of enormous dimensions. I certainly never doubted this. It was so widely perceived, discussed, described, and was very much the conventional wisdom among my middle-class Pakistani friends.

Ultimately, Mirza was overthrown and went into exile in London. He was entitled to a pension as, I think, a major general and a civil servant, on a British scale. (When independence came, they allowed the civil servants to keep their British pensions.) I knew just enough about him to know that he lived extremely modestly in London for many years, probably ten years before he died, and there was absolutely no evidence that he had much of anything beyond his pension.

That was something that I have long remembered in my Foreign Service experience, that conventional wisdom is not always correct, and one has to-you know, one needs to be a skeptic. It works the other way, too. When somebody appears to be as honest as the day is long, and then you find out that he's just sent six children to Ivy League colleges in the United States, you have reason to wonder.

So in any event, there was a strong sense that a coup was coming. The issue was not so much if it were coming as when it was coming. We certainly didn't encourage the coup, and indeed made clear again our preference for representative forms of government.

But on the twenty-third of March '82, I and three or four other ambassadors were tipped off late one evening that there would be a coup that night. And the military took over. The Chief of Staff became Chief Martial Law Administrator in an absolutely bloodless coup.

Q: Did they move into the presidential palace and the radio stations and so forth?

COON: Yes, they took over the radio station and the palace. It was quick, smooth, and didn't really cause much of a ripple, except they put into effect, of course, martial law regulations, and a number of ministers were arrested for corruption. The president himself was retired respectfully, and a martial law regime came in.

Q: Is he the one to whom you had presented your credentials?

COON: That's right.

Q: Were you under curfew under the martial law?

COON: Yes, there was a curfew. I don't remember how long it lasted.

Q: Was it a very binding curfew?

COON: We fairly quickly got passes for embassy vehicles. Again, Carl Schmidt and I had talked and- as I said, we did not approve the notion of a coup in any way, shape, or form, but we were aware that there was strong likelihood of one. Although it came a little earlier than I thought it would. But we figured we better be prepared, so we sat in the office one day and made a coup checklist, about what you do. Who you call into the embassy, what messages do you send to the Department, the consular message that "All Americans are okay," the press guidance-what we called our coup checklist, which Carl put on a three-by-five card and carried around in his pocket. So the night of the coup I could call him up, and he came over with his checklist, and we went through the drill and it went like clockwork.

I thought the interesting thing at a time like this, a mini-crisis-would be the coup itself- the events surrounding it, and how one handles the American community and all of that sort of thing. But what I discovered was that the really interesting thing about a coup is how you manage in the post-coup period, picking up the threads of your relationship with the government, and managing your own mission. And that I found really quite interesting: the post-coup management, if you will, of the relationship and of your own mission. And of Washington.

Q: You have to sort of recast your mind, I suppose, with the new team.

COON: The beauty of being the ambassador to Bangladesh and not the ambassador to a country where Washington is on your back all the time, is that you really have rather broad policy instructions on your role, and you know perfectly well that probably no one much higher than a desk officer is reading most of your reporting. You make a lot of your own decisions, and if you want instructions from the Department, you write your instructions, send them into the Department and ask them to send them back. It isn't like being in a place, I suspect, like Cairo or Tel Aviv, when the Department must send the most detailed instructions. Bangladesh may not loom large in American foreign policy, but it's a lot fun being in a place like that.

Q: It must be. You can use your own judgment.

COON: You don't have them breathing down your neck all the time, and we had no decent telephonic communication with Washington so they couldn't phone me very much and the time difference was such that-

Q: That's what I was going to ask you: whether you felt you had enough guidance from the Department. Obviously you felt you did; all you wanted. [Laughter]

COON: I think when we concluded our last conversation I was talking about the-in some ways more interesting-problem of post-coup management. How do you pick up the threads of your relationship with the host government, particularly when the position of your own government has not been sympathetic to the coup. And how do you manage your own country team, members of which may have rather varying reactions to events, and rather varying recommendations as to the course that should be followed. And again, the beauty of being an ambassador to a country like Bangladesh, is that you get only rather broad instructions from the Department, and to a large extent you write your own script, getting a Department approval as necessary.

Within a couple of days of the coup, I was invited by the now Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Ershad, to call on him, which was appropriate. I don't remember quite how many days, but it was perhaps three or four days afterward. And I went to the cantonment, there being no question of recognition of the new government.He pretty much outlined the reasons for his action, and the broad intentions of his government, particularly in the field of development, including, very high on his priority list, accelerated efforts in the field of family planning. Most of the goals which he outlined were consistent with our own policies toward Bangladesh. I reaffirmed our position on the desirability, over time, to build democratic institutions, or representative institutions, which he affirmed was also his intent.

Following this call, and over the next few weeks, was the issue of how, again, we picked up the threads, in relatively minor ways. When do we sign the first new AID agreement? Several fairly small agreements were pending. What posture do we take as members of the embassy vis-ï¿½-vis our conversations in Bangladesh, vis-ï¿½-vis the public? How do we answer questions from both foreign press and the local press?

And I found, interestingly enough, that my country team had rather varied views on what our relationship should be with the new military government. Some who had served in Latin America, were quite negative about military governments in general. Others saw this as an opportunity in terms of particular economic objectives in Bangladesh, the developmental side of things, since the previous government had not been a government which was decisive in terms of some of the hard economic choices Bangladesh needed to make.

Eventually, within a week or ten days of the coup, I realized that I had to get my country team together and sort out our goals and objectives vis-ï¿½-vis Bangladesh. We did this collectively. I sent the results into Washington and had it affirmed by Washington. And it was a lesson to me in the management of a country team, because what we came up with was probably less important than the process we went through in arriving at a consensus on our views. And from then on that became the document to which we could refer, and the consensus which emerged was the important thing in terms of how we approached things.

This was the end of March, I think and we signed off on our first AID agreement in early May-a relatively minor AID agreement. And we began to pick up the threads of a more normal relationship with the government.

The government in the meantime-General Ershad had appointed a cabinet fairly quickly, largely composed of technocrats in key economic positions, and a number of generals in other positions. He moved very rapidly to try to clean up corruption, and I think had some success, particularly in the early months or year and a half of the regime. And he named a rather brilliant finance minister who moved rapidly to construct a budget and an economic program, which was a very constructive departure in our view and in the view of the World Bank and the IMF.

At the same time the president and his cabinet moved vigorously to set in place a new industrial policy, which allowed for the denationalization of a significant amount of the industry which had been nationalized right after independence. And despite some cynicism on the part of many people that a policy was one thing and implementation was another, by the following December they had denationalized about a third of the jute industry and a large number of other smaller industries.

The first year or eighteen months of the new martial law administration were a period of substantial economic reform and movement in areas that were consistent with our own AID program and the policies of the Fund and the Bank. So it was a very exciting time. They brought the price of rice under control, which had been, certainly, one of the several factors that had helped provoke the coup. The following year they had a good harvest. They moved ahead with the decontrol of fertilizer and moving fertilizer distribution into the private sector, which was one of our important projects. It was really a very productive period, I think, and a period which all of us in the embassy found quite gratifying, particularly in the economic area.

After the first several months or a year, the president, not unlike his predecessor by two, Zia, began to slowly dismantle the martial law apparatus and moved tentatively toward elections, starting with local elections, which I think occurred about a year and a half after the coup. There were several efforts at a presidential election and parliamentary elections which were delayed because of uncertainties, with respect particularly to the participation of the opposition. These elections did not really come to pass until after I departed, but much of the groundwork was laid, and we certainly encouraged the civilianization and movement toward a return to some form of representative institutions.

Throughout, particularly the last year I was there, there was-as normally happens in Bangladesh as the rigor of a martial law government begins to dissipate-more and more room for opposition activity and a certain amount of conflict between opposition groups and the government. So there were occasional disorders and what are known as hartals there-general strikes-and demonstrations.

Q: Were these particularly violent, these demonstrations?

COON: Generally not. On one or two occasions, there was some violence, and I think two or three students were killed in one demonstration.

Q: Is it mainly students that provoke these, as it is in so many places?

COON: Students certainly played a role, and there were probably some small radical opposition groups which helped to provoke the students. So it was a combination. [Interruption]

Okay now, where were we?

Q: You were talking about the aftermath of the coup, and you were just talking about the student riots and the fact that radical elements would stir up the students, to some extent.

COON: I really don't have a whole lot more to say about-

Q: Well, I would gather from what you've told me that the new government certainly seemed to be well in agreement with what the United States policy was, anyway.

COON: Certainly in the economic sphere, yes.

Q: And family planning, that sort of thing. So, did you have a close relationship yourself with-

COON: President Ershad? Yes, I think I had a good relationship with President Ershad. I certainly had access to him whenever I wanted access to him. Access was not a problem. In fact I did not exercise my access more than I absolutely needed to, because I felt it was not either in the interests of the United States nor necessarily Bangladesh to have an over-identification.

Q: With the United States.

COON: The United States with Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a very friendly country. It's a country to which we give a great deal of aid. It is not an ally in the formal sense. It is a nonaligned country and a member of the Islamic conference.

Q: Is there a very large Russian presence there?

COON: There's a substantial Russian embassy, in fact. It was probably the largest embassy in town, but relations after '75 with the Soviets had cooled a great deal. Certainly, Bangladeshi relations with us were far more cordial than with the Russians. Indeed, in the-I guess it must have been in December of '83-the Bangladeshis expelled fifteen Soviet employees from the embassy

Certainly, the high point came in 1983. General Ershad came to power in March of '82. In the summer of 1983, President Reagan invited President Ershad for what is called an official working visit, as distinguished from a state visit. An official working visit implies a working session with the president, a lunch at the White House, and a brief meeting with the press, along with the president. We spent a great deal of the summer of 1983 preparing for the visit, preparing both the Bangladeshis for what they would find in Washington, and of course sending material to Washington that would be of use to them during this visit.

The foreign minister went in June. We prepared for his visit. I did not return for his visit, but of course I would return for President Ershad's visit. I went on leave in August of '83, home leave, and used that occasion for consultations in Washington and a visit to CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, US Pacific Fleet] in Honolulu to help prepare for the Ershad visit.

I flew back in late September to Bangladesh to be on the ground there, and returned in mid-October so I would be back two or three working days before the president arrived.

Q: So you don't travel with him actually.

COON: You don't travel with him, no. It was more important for me to get here and be sure that everything was in hand and be available here. Normally, that's the pattern.

Q: Do you bring any staff with you?

COON: No, I did not bring any staff with me. We had of course worked very hard for this event, to be sure that it went smoothly.

Ershad-it was going to be his first visit to the United States. And he was a man that, before he became Chief Martial Law Administrator, had really not been out of the Subcontinent. He had served as, I think, a military attachï¿½ in India, and of course he had gone through military academy in Pakistan. After he became president, I think he did go to a commonwealth conference and had made two or three foreign trips, but this was the first one to the United States, and he was, I think, both looking forward to it enormously and was a trifle nervous.

I checked into the department and moved into the Madison Hotel, where he was going to be staying, and I had a suite. He was coming into New York Sunday evening. Actually, I guess I checked in on Sunday with my bags, and then I flew up to New York on Sunday.

Just before I left for New York, I was informed that the Marine barracks had been blown up in Beirut. I recognized that this was an event of major proportions and a most serious situation for us. So I flew up to New York, very candidly, not having a very clear idea of what the impact would be on President Ershad's scheduled time with the president on Tuesday, two days later.

He came into New York, and I met him. They had been informed, I think, on the plane of the event. We spent the night in New York, and the program went as scheduled in terms of his flying down to Washington Monday morning by American military aircraft, and then we were helicoptered into town where he was greeted by the deputy secretary-the secretary was out of town-and the chief of protocol, and we went up by motorcade to the Madison. The rest of the day was largely a rest day.

But the next morning in the Madison, I turned on my television set early, because this was the day that we would have with the president, to hear the announcement of the American military action in Grenada, and saw the president's statement on the subject. I called the State Department to ascertain whether or not there were going to be any changes in our program.

There was no immediate answer to this question. I was supposed to be at the White House at ten-thirty to participate in the briefing of the president along with Assistant Secretary Murphy and a couple of other people. Eventually I was told to go ahead; they had no other instructions.

We indeed went to the White House, and the president came out of a cabinet meeting on Grenada, came in, and the program went ahead as scheduled. We had the briefing; he met with Ershad for about forty-five minutes, as scheduled; we had the luncheon, followed by a brief photo op with the press.

And I confess I was somewhat relieved. [Laughter]

Q: I don't wonder. You must have been on pins and needles. This was planned, I'm sure, months ahead.

COON: Months in advance. The only significant change in the program was that night. The Bangladeshis gave a dinner at which the vice president was going to be the chief guest, but the vice president, as you recall, was sent to Beirut, so on about two hours' notice, the chief justice was rung in to take his place, and the dinner generally went well.

Q: Chief justices don't mind being called in on two hours' notice?

COON: Well, he was very kind, I think, to substitute for the vice president. He is after all, the third-ranking person in the government in terms of protocol.

Q: Well, now, who would be the one who would actually call him? Is this all done through the desk officer?

COON: No, I think I worked through the chief of protocol.

Q: I see. Who was at that time Selwa Roosevelt.

COON: Yes, yes. She was very helpful, and I must say very effective. So the program went generally well. After the three days in Washington, we flew to Houston. From Houston we went to Los Angeles. The only time in my life I've been to Disneyland. It's great fun to go with a VIP because you get all sorts of special treatment. You don't have to stand in lines. And then I left him there, and he flew on to Honolulu for a rest stop. I returned to Washington where I was going to change my spots entirely, and turn into a spouse. Because His Majesty the King of Nepal was coming for a state visit, and my husband, of course, would be the ambassadorial figure. That took place right after Thanksgiving, so I did not return to post during the interval. I had some work to do in Washington.

Q: If you hadn't been here, would you, do you think, have come on to be a spouse?

COON: I think I probably would have, because Her Majesty was coming, too. I think the department would indeed have paid my way back. This was a great affair, because it was a state visit and involved a state dinner. I once again met the president in my new clothes.

Q: He must have wondered if he was seeing double.

COON: I think there was a moment or two when he wondered. I accompanied the Queen for morning coffee with Mrs. Reagan, rather than being in the Oval Office with the president.

Q: Do you feel a little schizophrenic when you have to switch roles this way?

COON: [Laughter] It was rather fun, actually. And the two in such rapid succession.

Q: Now a state visit, what does that comprise?

COON: A state visit is a more formal affair. Usually the chief of state comes with a larger entourage. They again were put up in the Madison. Blair House was having repairs done. It involves a meeting with the president, and also a state dinner.

Q: Does your husband have input as to who is invited to that state dinner?

COON: We usually suggest some names, but the guest list is made up by the White House.

Q: If we could go back just a little bit, who met President Ershad besides yourself in New York? Was it the Deputy Chief of Protocol?

COON: You know, I can't remember. There was someone from protocol and someone from the mayor's office in New York.

Q: I see. Where does that military aircraft leave? What airport?

COON: I think they came in to JFK. We had to shift to La Guardia, spend the night there, and the military aircraft went from there.

Q: I see. So they leave from the commercial places.

COON: It's the VIP configuration aircraft.

Q: Tell us about that. What does a VIP aircraft have that other aircraft don't have? Are there armchairs?

COON: More comfortable seats. Yes.

Q: I dare say the food isn't quite so plastic as on most airlines.

COON: Well, it's Air Force food. [Laughter]

Q: Is that better or worse than commercial?

COON: I guess it's better. At this distance I'm slightly muddled on the aircraft I was on for the Ershad visit and for His Majesty's visit. On Their Majesties' visit, after the Washington portion of the visit, they went on to-and I accompanied-to Dallas for the-no, first we went to Florida and went to Disney World.

Q: Is this forced onto these people, or do they want to see it?

COON: Oh, no. This is their choice. Very much their choice. So that time we went to Disney World and Epcot Center, which I hadn't seen either. I remember that most vividly because I had gotten a new pair of shoes and had a fearful corn on my toe. But in any event, then we went from there to Dallas, where we had seats on the fifty-yard line for the Dallas Cowboys-Washington Redskins football game.

Q: Now why would Their Majesties be interested in that?

COON: I'm not quite sure. It was a big event including dinner that night put on by one of the Murchison family, which was, I must say, a rather spectacular affair.

From Dallas we flew to Boston. His Majesty had been a student at Harvard for a year, and the president of Harvard put on a dinner for him in Cambridge at the President's House, which is a representational house.

My great delight in that was that I have seldom experienced greater cultural differentiation than a black-tie dinner in Dallas one night with the Murchison family and all of the glitter of Dallas-the table settings and the crystal-to the President's House in Harvard, also black tie, with all of the best of the Cambridge community out in the long dresses which I strongly suspect dated back to about the mid-'50s.

Q: They de-mothball them.

COON: And the service provided by students, and the food being best described as "rather plain New England." But the Harvard community exuding the self-confidence that only the Harvard community can exude. The contrast was absolutely marvelous. I know, because of a conversation afterward, that His Majesty was also amused by the contrast.

Q: I suppose that the conversation at Harvard was quite of a different caliber, wasn't it?

COON: The conversation was quite different, too. Only in these United States can you get a contrast that quite measures up to that. The President's House, as I say, is a representational house. It's an old paneled house, and perhaps was rather pleasant when lived in by the president, but now is rather dark and almost spartan in its table arrangements and that sort of thing. [Laughter]

Q: How large are these parties?

COON: Oh, heavens, I don't know. The Murchison party must have been-they probably were similar in size, maybe seventy or eighty people, something like that, but I'm just guessing at that. Maybe a hundred. Q: You didn't have a Texas barbecue, though?

COON: No, it wasn't a Texas barbecue. Oh, it was very formal, very formal.

Q: Everything brand new?

COON: Everything at least a fairly recent vintage. And a beautiful harpist in the corner playing a harp; the jewelry and the designer gowns-there was no smell of mothballs at any rate.

Q: Although the jewels may well have just come out of the bank.

COON: The jewels may have just come out of the bank, and they came from a very large vault.

Q: And in New England, I can just imagine: each lady had a Tiffany gold band and a solitaire, probably; not too large.

COON: Not too large, and a very tasteful necklace of pearls-small pearls. [Laughter]

Well, I left them in Boston because I had to get back to my post.

Q: Your husband stayed with them, did he?

COON: Carl continued on. I think they then went on to Atlanta, the West Coast, and Honolulu, and then he came on back. The Nepalese went on to Tokyo for a visit to Japan, and Carl came on back through Dhaka to his post, but by that time I'd been back in Dhaka for several days.

Q: Are you flown always on the same Air Force plane, or a similar one, on all of these trips around? It's all laid on by the US Government, is it?

COON: This is all established by protocol as to exactly what is provided. As I recall, on His Majesty's visit we had an Air Force plane available, I think, throughout the visit. With President Ershad we had an Air Force plane to Houston and then I think we had to take a commercial plane to Los Angeles, if I remember correctly.

Q: But the government picks up the tab?

COON: For a certain number of days, and beyond a certain number of days, it doesn't. I mean, this is all very carefully defined.

Q: In other words, they can't just come over here and spend six months cruising around.

COON: No, no. And it's a shorter number of days for an official working visit, and a longer number of days for a state visit, but in any event it's all very carefully defined. One has to be very careful that your host government understands exactly what-

Q: And that is your job to tell them before you go.

COON: That's right. That they understand just exactly what we provide, how long we provide, the size of the entourage that we will look after.

Q: How many, for example, were in the two different entourages?

COON: Oh, I think there were a dozen or fifteen perhaps in President Ershad's entourage; well, maybe ten or a dozen, and His Majesty's was a little larger. The Bangladeshi ambassador here traveled with his president, and the Nepalese ambassador here traveled with Their Majesties. Of course they have a major role in arrangements for the visit, too. Royal visits are particularly a test of one's skills, because royal protocol anywhere is perhaps more rigorous.

Q: But Americans are not supposed to curtsy and that sort of thing, are they, or bow?

COON: No, we don't curtsy, but royalty has generally more of a hierarchy in terms of a, b, c's, and who can be in touch with them, and that sort of thing.

Q: I see. Well, could you go into a little more detail on the state dinner? One reads about them in the paper, but most people don't have a chance to go. Again, are the jewels and the gowns . . .

COON: Yes. One of the things I did in September, when I was back on leave, was head for a personal shopper in Garfinckel's. Tell her exactly what my problems were in terms of the social events I was going to have to attend, and the travel I was going to have to do, and the climatic changes between Washington and Dallas, for example. Or Los Angeles. And work out with her a small but interchangeable wardrobe. One of the things one has to take into account is one's expenditures on these.

Q: Yes, because this is all on you, isn't it?

COON: Oh, absolutely. And not insignificant. But I must say, she did very well by me. In fact, this is my travel dress in airplanes in warmer climates. It's crushable. [Laughter]

Q: Well, you have to think of those things. You haven't much time . . .

COON: Oh, yes. You have to think of those things. You have very little time, and you have to be extremely punctual, and you've got to be able to change very quickly. And the real trick in all of this is making the motorcade and being sure you're in the right seat in the right car in the motorcade, because motorcades-once the principals are in the motorcade-take off. So that one of the things you do is strike up rather good relations with the Secret Service detail, and be sure that you know who they are and they know who you are, and they get you in the right car. And you're down in time. During the Ershad visit, we left one cabinet minister in the hotel who didn't get down on time. A rather irate cabinet minister. [Laughter]

Q: That'll teach him, indeed! I suppose the ambassador sits in the car with whoever the principal visitor is?

COON: No. Usually on the formal part of the visit, the chief of protocol sits with the head of state.

Q: What about the Queen? Where does she sit?

COON: I think it's the chief of protocol and Their Majesties in the lead car. With President Ershad, it was slightly complicated because an official working visit-well, that's not true. I was going to say on an official working visit the spouse is not as much of a figure, in the sense that there's no state dinner, but President Ershad did bring his wife, and their baby, who was under a year old. And an ayah to look after the baby. That presented special requirements in terms of-I didn't have to make the arrangements, but somebody had to make the arrangement to be sure there was a crib in the room, and that sort of thing. They were extremely devoted to him-it was their first and their only child-a child born rather late in life. So there was a certain amount of bouncing baby up and down on the airplane. [Laughter]

Q: Did you have to take care of him?

COON: Oh, I kind of oohed and aahed.

Q: The luncheon, what sort of thing does one wear to a luncheon? A suit?

COON: I wore a good suit.

Q: But of course a formal dress for the dinner?

COON: Formal dress, yes. Fortunately, I had something left over from Morocco that I managed to get away with, so I didn't have to buy a long dress.

Q: Now, reversing the coin, was your husband here for the Ershad visit?

COON: No, because spouses don't figure as much in that. Begum Ershad did have coffee with Mrs. Reagan, but-now wait a minute; she had coffee or tea at the White House. I wasn't there because I was with President Ershad, so I can't remember exactly.

Q: And somebody, I suppose, then takes her to a museum or whatever she wants to do?.

COON: Yes, oh, yes. There have to be two separate programs, one for the principal and one for the spouse. For example, with Her Majesty the Queen of Nepal, I accompanied her to Gallaudet College and Children's Hospital.

Q: What was her interest in the deaf?

COON: Well, she was interested in children's things, and so we went to Children's Hospital and Gallaudet. Begum Ershad did quite a lot of shopping, and fortunately there is a particularly wonderful man at protocol who specializes in looking after spouses.

Q: Oh, really? Who's that?

COON: Patrick-it's an Irish name. It's not Kelly. I can't think at the moment, but he's extremely good at it, and so he accompanied Begum Ershad in shopping. They can do sightseeing, whatever the spouse is interested in, but the program is generally pretty well set.

Q: So that you do have to arrange for all of these things as well . . .

COON: People back here are doing it. The desk officer and protocol are hard at it.

Q: That's very interesting that it should come, coincidentally that way, so that you literally did have to shed one skin and put on another one and see it from the flip side.

COON: Yes, that's right. See it from the flip side.

Q: So you really got the entire treatment of visits, didn't you? In other words, the same would hold true if Mrs. Thatcher brought her husband?

COON: Yes, so it would be a separate program for him, as he desired. And of course, you take into account the desires of the spouse.

Q: This brings up a very unimportant but curious thing: would Mrs. Reagan then give him a tea or a coffee?

COON: I haven't any idea.

Q: Following these things through you come up with all sorts of strange questions.

Back at your post, did you have any CODELS [congressional delegations] or any important people coming?

COON: I think I mentioned earlier on that Ambassador Kirkpatrick came just a very few days after I arrived at post. We had relatively few visitors in Bangladesh. In fact, I positively encouraged people to come out. Peter McPherson came out, the director of AID. I had two congressmen come out: Bowen from Mississippi, the second year I was there, and Congressman Pritchard from Washington, the third year I was there. Both, to a certain extent, at my own instigation, because I felt it was useful to have members of Congress know what we were doing in Bangladesh, because it was a very substantial AID program.

Q: What were their committees back here?

COON: Both of them were from the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Asia. Bowen was quite interesting because he was from Mississippi and came from an area where rice was a major product. Essentially a delta country, so that he found many parallels in Bangladesh. Congressman Pritchard was particularly interested in the population program. Both of them have since retired from Congress, but had a very thoughtful and constructive approach to AID and the population programs, so I welcomed both of them, and the Bangladesh government bent over backwards to welcome them.

Q: At whose instigation did Ershad go to the United States? Was this something that you arranged?

COON: I was made aware, through a variety of channels, that President Ershad would certainly welcome an appropriate invitation. Of course, I reported this to my government, and after very careful consideration, we recommended that it would be in the best interests of the United States and our relationship with Bangladesh to have such a visit at the official working level. The Bangladeshis were active at this end. These visits have to be scheduled way in advance because obviously the president's time is very valuable. I think we got word late in June that the White House would be agreeable to arranging such a visit at a mutually convenient time, and eventually mid-October was settled on.

Q: I see. So that's quite a way ahead.

COON: Oh, sometimes these things are scheduled a year, a year and a half ahead.

Q: I guess they are with Great Britain because their schedules are also so busy. Who pays? Do they come over on-is there a Bangladesh airline? And do they take it, if so?

COON: My recollection is-and my recollection isn't perfect, you know-there was a lot happening in that period-they took the Bangladesh airline to London, and commercial air to New York. The King of Nepal actually took his own-Royal Nepal Airline plane-all the way to the United States.

Q: It makes good PR for their airlines.

COON: The Bangladesh Airline, Biman, does not normally fly to New York. It flies only to London.

Q: At this time was your post classified as a "four" or a "three?" I understood from somebody, I can't remember who, that the post classification was raised while you were there.

COON: It was raised to a "three," exactly when I don't remember, but it was raised to a "three".

Q: What is the basis for raising or lowering a post's-well, they don't do it anymore.

COON: I don't know exactly what the criteria were, but I think it has to do with the number of personnel-in other words, the size of the mission, the size of the AID program, complexity of the relationship. I'm not exactly sure what the criteria were.

Q: That means more money, doesn't it, for the ambassador? Used to?

COON: It used to, yes. It was ridiculous to have Bangladesh the equivalent of a very small African post, because we had a very substantial AID program, and Bangladesh is a country of a hundred million people which was taking a much more active role-in the U.N., for example. Bangladesh had a seat on the Security Council. The year I went there they very nearly became president of the General Assembly. They tied. It was the first time in history that there was a tie vote for the presidency of the General Assembly, and they had to draw lots, and the Bangladeshis lost. But this year a Bangladeshi is president of the General Assembly.

Q: Which is an indication of the country's importance, I suppose, in the nonaligned world?

COON: It's an indication, to some extent, of its importance, and to some extent the skill of its diplomacy. Bangladesh has a very professional foreign service. Most of the senior foreign service officers were at one time members of the Pakistan Foreign Service, you know, before 1971. The Pakistan Foreign Service was a very select and highly trained group, and a very competent group. The members of the Pakistan Foreign Service, almost without exception, who were Bengalis, came over to Bangladesh at the time of the independence struggle. And particularly at the senior levels, it's a very competent and professional foreign service.

Q: You had mentioned that the relationship vis-ï¿½-vis the United States at the time you were there was much warmer, closer if you will, than it was with the Russians. Was this reflected in the local press? Did you get a lot of coverage on things that you did, and ribbons you cut, and that sort of thing?

COON: Yes, we got really quite a lot of press coverage.

Q: And how much influence does that government have over the press?

COON: A varying amount at varying times. In the early days of a fairly rigorous martial law, there was very substantial control over the press. And as martial law relaxed, opposition parties began to emerge again. I think, up until the time I left, there was a reluctance to directly criticize the martial law administration, but there was certainly a fair amount of press criticism of policies and programs and that sort of thing.

In South Asia-Bangladesh and Pakistan-there have been recurring periods of martial law, and it's not-I know this sounds peculiar-it's relatively benign martial law. It's not a Chile-you don't have large numbers of disappearance cases. At various points there may be a number of people jailed, but then they're released rather quickly. For the most part it's not a harshly brutal kind of martial law.

Q: How much did this curfew and martial law impinge on the freedom of you and your staff?

COON: The curfew didn't last very long.

Q: It didn't. Did you have to have permission to leave the city?

COON: The embassy people, as opposed to AID, were supposed to notify the foreign ministry. I, of course, notified the government because it had to notify the local authorities for security reasons. People in AID did not, when they were visiting projects and that sort of thing. And it was a fairly relaxed system, in the sense that I'm not sure every time I flew off to open a rural electrification project that we went through a formal process.

Q: So you were permitted to go pretty much as you wanted.

COON: Yes, I could travel quite widely.

Q: There was no place that was forbidden?

COON: No. During part of my tour there, there was some difficulties in what is known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but it was not an area that was heavily populated nor was I likely to visit.

Q: Did you have US reporters come through?

COON: Yes. We had no American press stationed in Bangladesh, but the press corps in Delhi covered Bangladesh, and sometimes people from Bangkok came over. At the time of the coup they all descended, and from time to time they would come. At the time of the election before the coup, there were several American correspondents that came through. For the correspondents posted in Delhi, all of South Asia was their beat, but there was an awful lot more going on in Pakistan and India and they spent far more time there. But about once or twice a year, the better ones would come over to do stories in depth on various issues.

Q: Would you give a luncheon for them, or whatever?

COON: I would almost always see them.

Q: How did they write up what was going on? Were they sympathetic?

COON: Generally speaking, I think the reporting was quite good.

Q: You would brief them?

COON: Certainly I would background them. There were two or three very good pieces on the population program.

Q: What about consular problems? Did you have a lot of trouble with consular problems?

COON: Again, part of the time I had one and a half consular officers. We had a high incidence of fraud in terms of visas, large numbers of people that wanted to come to the States.

Q: False papers?

COON: Oh, a whole variety of things. So that it was a fairly rigorous first post for a consular officer. I guess the whole time I was there we had a first-tour consular officer. We had relatively few problems on what we call citizen services. There was the occasional problem with an American citizen. There was one American woman who drifted between Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand who presented problems to all of the consular officers in the area.

Q: It wasn't on the beat for the kids with their smoking pot?

COON: We had very little-you mean youngsters coming out to Asia?

Q: Yes.

COON: We had very few of those. There was very little tourism in Bangladesh.

Q: They went to India for the gurus, I suppose.

COON: They went to India for spiritual reasons-and Nepal. My husband had far more interesting consular cases than I had. His consular officer occupied most of his or her time on citizen services with bizarre types in many cases. Now we had the occasional difficult case; an occasional death case, for example: somebody killed in an auto accident. It gets very complicated in a country that has no formal undertaking arrangements, and the only way to embalm is to persuade the local medical college to do it, and then go out and buy the embalming fluids.

So for a consular officer it was an interesting assignment. You know, we ignore what I call the "caste" of undertakers in this country, but you try living in a country without them, and it's another kettle of fish.

Q: And a body cannot be transported unless it is embalmed. I know it's a long and difficult and often unsavory experience. Did you have to come in much on these fraud cases?

COON: No, I left that to the consular officer.

Q: They were able to handle that. What about the inspectors? Did they come through?

COON: I was blessed by the fact that the inspectors came through about two months after I arrived. I found the inspection process a very constructive one. In some ways the new team wasn't responsible for things that were out of whack, and in fact, we had a very good inspection report. You can benefit from a good inspection by their identifying areas that you ought to look at, and their making suggestions. One of the inspectors, for example, worked very closely and constructively with a consular officer on the physical rearrangement and expansion of the consular section, which we subsequently implemented. So I found it generally a very good experience.

We also had a wage-and-classification survey of all of the Foreign Service national positions, which can be an unmitigated disaster in morale terms. But I had been tipped off-again, there's a benefit to being married to an officer in the vicinity. I had been tipped off by my husband about the problems Kathmandu had experienced, and thanks to that, we were very well prepared and came out of that, on balance, better off than we went into it. A wage-and-classification survey looks at every Foreign Service national position, assessing whether it should be left as it is, downgraded, or upgraded. You have to very carefully review all the position descriptions. Perfectly wretched job. And so your preparations are very important. We were-thanks partly to my spouse and partly to a very good DCM and administrative counselor-we were very well prepared, and I think came out of that better than most of the other posts in the area.

Q: I suppose this is a different set of people than the inspectors?

COON: Yes. Oh, it can be a disaster if they recommend downgrading half the positions at post. You can imagine the impact on morale that has.

Q: Do they ever fire people? Say, "You don't need that position, get rid of the person."

COON: I'm not sure they can do that. No, they can't actually fire somebody, but it can have a very severe impact on a post.

Q: It's not part of the scope of this study, but the business of foreign service nationals is a very tricky one, because these people are your local expertise, carry over from one to another, and yet they don't have an awful lot of job security, do they? In many cases? I'm thinking of the fact that so many posts are now being closed.

COON: At the moment, yes.

Q: And those people are just gone. Then when you need them again . . .

COON: And many of them have been with us through thick and thin. There were many Foreign Service nationals that stuck with us during the Bangladesh war under, in some cases, conditions and situations of very considerable danger. Our position, as you recall-the tilt toward Pakistan, did not make us wildly popular in Bangladesh at the time. We have some long-term and very loyal Foreign Service nationals.

Q: We've been blessed with that throughout the world, it seems to me.

Did you have to do a lot of official entertaining?

COON: I did quite a lot of official entertaining, probably not as much as I should have. That varied a great deal, from the very large national day reception, which I chose to give in February because of the climatic conditions-Fourth of July was early monsoon and would not have been suitable outside-to the occasional large reception, to smaller dinners, and stag dinners. I found that, particularly when I had visitors from Washington, I would very often give a stag dinner. Despite the fact that I was usually the only female, I hostessed stag dinners. People got very used to it. I don't think it bothered people.

Q: Did you call on your DCM to be your host?

COON: My DCM would act as my host frequently. I found in Bangladesh I would use the long dining table strictly for diplomatic corps dinners, when the protocol was obvious and you knew people were coming and you could seat them. When I had dinners that involved primarily host country nationals, it was difficult to be sure that everyone who accepted would in fact attend. I would usually use three round tables that would seat up to eight-it was more comfortable with seven-I would host one, my DCM would host another, and another American officer would host the third. Or my husband, if he happened to be down. I found that round tables blurred issues of protocol. [Laughter] And they also lend themselves to being able to remove place settings and shift people around quickly, when you get up to the point where you've got to go in the dining room, and three guests haven't shown up, or they didn't bring their wives, or whatever it might be.

Q: So you could over-schedule things, like the airlines do, and then if they didn't come, you had more room at the tables.

COON: That would probably have been a disaster, because if I'd overbooked, they all would have come and brought their cousin-brothers!

Q: It's very nerve-wracking, though, isn't it?

COON: I worked out an arrangement very handily. It worked particularly well the last year with the resident manager that I have previously described. She would stay until the time that we sat down. Five or ten minutes beforehand when we had a fix on who had come and who hadn't, I'd go out and have that little board, you know, where you have the place settings. And I would very quickly, using the board, make the changes that had to be made, and then she could very quickly make the changes physically on the table. With almost no fuss and feathers you could adapt to the situation. I could usually do that in less than five minutes. Reshuffle my cards, and then she would track it on the table.

Q: Did you have any particular problems-we've gone through consular and so forth-with the AID people, or USIS people?

COON: Particularly for the first two years, I had an excellent PAO. We had an active program, I thought a very good USIS program. Well-integrated into the rest of the mission and the goals of the mission. For example, we were very heavy on bringing out American lecturers on economic subjects that were supportive of what we were trying to do in the aid field. AID was in another building, and I think generally my relationships for AID were good. It's a bureaucracy that is difficult to move with any alacrity.

Q: We had discussed before how you headed off problems, intra-mission rivalries.

COON: Yes. I mean one was not always successful, by a long shot.

Q: But pretty much, you didn't have any really bad problems with morale? It could be very bad at a post like Bangladesh.

COON: I don't think we had serious morale problems, although there was a certain skittishness on security from time to time. Dhaka was a medium-threat post, and I tried to keep lines of communication open to the community. I'm not sure I was always successful-I think we did reasonably well.

Q: All right. You sort of kept an eye on the school, that type of thing?

COON: I think ambassadors ought to stay out of school business. My DCM kept a weather-eye on it, and particularly the last year, there were some monumental problems in the school that ended with both the principal and the deputy looking for new jobs. You know what a small community focuses on; the school and the recreation center.

Q: And the commissary.

COON: And the commissary! The school problem, the last year, was one that I think had the potential of being worse than it was, and it was quite bad enough.

Q: Were you obliged to step in on that?

COON: The DCM kept me informed, and I think I discussed the issue with a couple of people privately. I did not attempt to move in and make decisions, because I believe that a school is a community responsibility and that, in my experience anyway, an ambassador that tries to run the school is in deep trouble, and it is not the proper role for an ambassador. You have to keep an eye on it. I think ultimately my DCM-again, he wasn't on the school board, but by some very skillful guidance-managed to keep the thing from splitting the community wide open.

And the recreation association. We had only two tennis courts, and that was the big issue, scheduling for tennis courts. That was run by the recreation association. I probably-indirectly-influenced the course of events a couple of times toward more inclusiveness, rather than exclusiveness.

Q: It is interesting how, at a post, if word gets around, the ambassador doesn't like this, or the ambassador thinks that, it carries tremendous weight.

COON: You know, it does, and it's very hard to remember that as ambassador, all the time. [Laughter]

Q: I suppose it is. Did you have a swimming pool connected with the residence?

COON: No, not connected with the residence. I used the recreation association's.

Q: So that was one headache you didn't have.

COON: Thank heavens, no. No, I did not have either a tennis court or a swimming pool. I had a garden full of frogs. I used the swimming pool of the recreation association. I would go over and paddle around there to get my exercise.

Q: Did you have a commissary? That's another thing that can be a can of worms.

COON: Yes. We had a commissary. I think there had been difficulty just before I arrived. There was a switch in managers. That sorted itself out reasonably well. You also have the Marine Guard. I would of course participate in the Marine Ball, and from time to time, attend a Marine function of one sort or another. I think we only had one problem. I had to exercise my responsibility and ask that one Marine be relieved for a local incident.

Q: They're such young boys, they tend to get a little unruly sometimes, and get drunk. Did you have that kind of a problem?

COON: Well, we had the TGIF. It was TGIT there, because Friday was a holiday, so it was Thursday. I made it clear to both the DCM and the admin officer and the security officer that we had to keep an eye on TGIT, because it can get out of hand. I think it was generally fairly well within bounds.

Q: What about on-the-job training for young officers? You have said that it was a first-time post for your consular person.

COON: We had several junior officers at post. We had one in the political section, the consular section, the economic section. AID had a junior officer, and USIS had a junior officer. We had a fourth one that alternated between a consular and occasionally a slot as being a staff aide to me. We had a rotational program that I think was a very good rotational program, overseen by the DCM. The DCM took a lot of interest in the junior officers. Oh, we had a junior officer in the GSO section too. So we had, I think, a reasonably good rotational program. At least once a year I would have the junior officers to lunch or tea, and I should have done it more often.

Q: You did at least do that, which brought them into the residence.

COON: Yes, and I would try to include them from time to time in embassy functions, representational events.

Q: Was your home used for the Marine Ball?

COON: No, the Marine Ball was held in a local hotel.

Q: What input did you have in this junior officer rotational program? Did you have any input in setting it up? Or was this a continuation?

COON: It was a continuation. We had these positions at the post, and my DCM each year would spend an agonizing amount of time working out the appropriate rotation, and then would put it up to me.

Q: Six months each, or one year?

COON: A year. You know, from consular, say, to GSO, and from political to econ, econ to political.

Q: Is this why you say you had one and a half consular officers?

COON: Yes.

Q: Now, what do you feel were your major successes?

COON: Ouch. Sometimes I compare a chief of mission to an orchestra leader. It's your job to see that the orchestra plays from the same score, although each section of the orchestra-the brass, the violins, percussion, flutes, and whatnot-are making their own contribution. I think it is the responsibility of the conductor-or the ambassador-to see that the sections play from the same score, which is, I suppose, in another way, saying that the mission is operating from a common sense of purpose or looking toward a common set of goals.

There were certainly many times when the violins and the wind instruments may have been a few beats apart. There may have been some dissonances in my orchestra. There was an occasional cello in the back row that needed a little more practice on his instrument, but I think for the most part we knew what we were about, and did a reasonably good job. And for this I don't take the credit. I mean, the orchestra is what does it, for the most part.

We sustained what had been a good relationship with Bangladesh, and perhaps improved it slightly. We made some genuine progress in development, particularly with the new government that came into being. We only played perhaps a relatively small role in that, but the statistics on food production, relative price stability, and economic growth in Bangladesh, I think, would substantiate that there was progress during that period. It was a period where it was a lot of fun to be there. I've often wondered what it would be like to have been ambassador in an African country that was going backwards in terms of their whole development program, and was monumentally resistant to really much of any reform.

You also have to remember that an ambassador is there at a particular period, and there's much that happened beforehand and there's much that's going to happen afterward. You can make a contribution in that piece of time but you're always building on what somebody else did.

I think I built a good relationship with the chief of state, with President Ershad, a relationship of considerable confidence. His trip to the United States was certainly a success, in terms of moving that process ahead. And we played a modest but constructive role in terms of encouraging a movement back toward more representative forms of government and the rule of law, which I consider extremely important. I think that's a plus. So it's hard to put one's finger on a single accomplishment for which one can take credit.

Q: What about population containment?

COON: We had a very substantial increase in distribution of certain contraceptive devices, condoms and pills, being marketed commercially through an arrangement which we heavily subsidized. That was quite a successful program. In fact, by the time I left Bangladesh, we were, through subsidized commercial marketing, selling more contraceptives than the government was giving away.

Q: Is that so? You mean the US subsidized the commercial market?

COON: It was called a "social marketing" program. This had been done in a number of countries, and it was really very successful in Bangladesh. We set up, in effect, a company, with an American advisor and a Bangladeshi general manager. We provided them the contraceptives virtually free, and they set up a marketing network of wholesalers who would market to retailers, very much like a pharmaceutical marketing arrangement. And the wholesalers would get a little bit of profit, and the retailers of course could get a little bit of profit, and the contraceptives were sold at a subsidized rate. The commercial marketing company also did a lot of quite sophisticated advertising. And that was very successful. We also worked with the Bangladeshi government on the voluntary sterilization program, to ensure its voluntary nature and the quality of the program. I think we contributed there.

Reliable statistics are pretty hard to come by, but we think that the rate of population increase was coming down slightly from close to three percent or over to roughly 2.5 percent.

Q: The birth rate was down?

COON: The rate of population increase was down. From close to three percent to perhaps 2.5 or 2.6 percent. We also had encouraging statistics on the contraceptive prevalency rate, the rate at which fertile couples were using contraceptives.

Q: We were talking about the contraceptive prevalency rate.

COON: Oh, and that the demand for family planning was greater than the supply, at this stage, so that there was a market there that still had not been filled.

Another area which was a very important part of the mission was in the field of agriculture, where AID supported the work of the agricultural experiment station (which I visited several times). The station was adapting rice varieties from the Rice Research Institute in the Philippines to Bangladeshi conditions, and also working on some other varieties. We provided a great deal of the phosphate fertilizer used in Bangladesh under our AID program, and in the process, helped the government to effect reforms in the distribution system of fertilizer.

Q: It's not enough to get the stuff there; you have to get it to-?

COON: You have to get it to the farmers, and you have to get it to the farmers when they need it.

Q: How was the transportation system when you were there?

COON: It's a very difficult country in terms of modern transportation, because it is essentially a delta that is intersected by literally hundreds of rivers. The traditional form of transportation is river boat, which is still a major form of transportation. Building roads in a delta which is constantly flooded is difficult, and railways-there was rather limited rail transportation. The major national highway between the port of Chittagong and the capital of Dhaka, for example, uses two ferries across rivers, and to get from the eastern half of the country to the western half of the country was a long ferry ride across the Brahmaputra.

Q: In times of flood, could you get from one side to the other, or would you be absolutely stuck?

COON: In some respects, the flooded periods were, I think, for many Bangladeshis, periods when transportation was easier, because they just took to their boats, and even in flooded periods, for the most part, we could get around using ferries

Q: Do they have a history of riverboat people, people who live on boats?

COON: Oh yes, yes. There's a wonderful tradition of riverboats and a tremendous variety of river craft that are locally made.

I traveled fairly widely in Bangladesh, from the tea estates of northeastern Bangladesh to the mangrove swamps of the southwestern part of the country; and from the Burmese border in the southeast to the northern tip of the country. On a clear day you can see Nepal across that little strip of India known as the Shiliguri Gap.

Q: And you took different modes of transportation?

COON: I took jeeps. My official car, more often than not, was a jeep. I took a two-day trip by river launch, loaned to me by one of the local officials. I took the ferry from Dhaka to Khulna, which is an overnight trip by river steamer, old-fashioned paddlewheel riverboats. I don't think I traveled by train in Bangladesh.

Q: The trains would be very, very overcrowded, wouldn't they?

COON: Oh yes, I traveled a short distance by train, an hour or two out of Dhaka. So I used road, rail, rivers and air. Occasionally I'd be taken on helicopter flights as well as traveling on regular planes.

Q: Would they be American helicopters?

COON: My recollection is that they used one American-the president used an American helicopter, but I think there was also a Soviet helicopter that had been provided to the Bangladeshis several years earlier.

Q: I see. When you went around, did you give a lot of speeches?

COON: Yes. You tend to give speeches on these trips in most places. The Rotary Club is absolutely ubiquitous in South Asia.

Q: [Laughter] So you were sort of passed from one to another?

COON: Or universities.

Q: What about education for women? Is it anything on the order that it is in India?

COON: I can't give you percentages. Certainly in Dhaka, an increasing number of Bangladeshi girls were finishing school and going on to university, but it was certainly a far, far smaller percent than for males. My recollection is that the literacy figure for Bangladesh was around twenty-six percent, so my guess is that-and this is a guess-probably literacy among women is ten percent or less.

Q: They would have to also have enough money to be able to spend the time going to school.

COON: Yes. And there is the issue, of course, of very early marriage.

Q: Done by families with dowries and the usual customs?

COON: Oh, yes.

Q: Did you travel abroad much? Well, of course, you did. You went to visit your husband.

COON: I did. I traveled to Nepal, averaging about every other month. We also met on a couple of occasions in India, or traveled to India together, for a chiefs of mission meeting or other conferences in India, and we made a three-week trip to China together at our own expense. In Beijing we were used by the embassy to visit some of the Chinese officials concerned with South Asia, and some of the academic institutions in Beijing, quasi-governmental institutions.

Q: That must have been fun. Everyone says that China is a fascinating experience. Did you have the experience that you didn't know where you were going until you got there?

COON: The German ambassador in Dhaka, who was my colleague, had been in China a year before, and he had some thoughts. Then we stayed with the Hummels, our ambassador to China, in Beijing, so we had a pretty good idea of where we wanted to go, and then we had to work out what we could do.

Q: You weren't on a tour, then?

COON: We were on a tour of two, where we had a guide each place that we went. We were met by a guide.

Q: So you had more scope.

COON: So we had flexibility.

Q: Well, may I ask you what were your relationships with the women officers-or were there any women officers?

COON: Oh, yes, there were several in both the embassy and the AID mission. I'm not sure whether I mentioned this before, but a few weeks after I got there, I met with several of the professional women in the various parts of the embassy, to consult with them on how I related to women's organizations in Bangladesh. Or how I should relate to women's organizations in Bangladesh, because I was being deluged with invitations to speak to women's groups. And I think they concurred with my judgment that, at least the first year or so, I should not speak to many women's groups, feeling that I needed to establish my credentials as the American ambassador in Dhaka, not a woman ambassador.

But when I left, the women members of the staff in the embassy-professional and support staff-all had a luncheon for me. Two or three of them said that they felt it had made a substantial difference to them to have a woman ambassador. I think one of them implied that it was good for her boss. [Laughter] Who apparently was not among the most enlightened of men. And he had to report to me. So I found among the women in the embassy, generally a very positive reaction.

Q: Did you find that this carried over at all to the Bangladeshi women?

COON: Oh, yes. Very much so. Very positive reaction.

Q: One of your fellow ambassadors learned, subsequent to her tour in Africa, that because she was there, two women were appointed to very high positions. Because she had been there, it was thought that, "If America does this, it's got to be the thing to do." These women met her subsequently, and they said, "Had it not been for you, we would not have been given these slots." Did anything like that happen to you?

COON: I'm not conscious of anything specific like that, but again, as I said earlier, I was constantly told by Bangladeshi women that they were terribly glad I was there. I think it did make a significant impact on that portion of society.

Q: What about your secretaries, your personal secretaries? They were women?

COON: Oh, yes. I had two of the best. I had one, Julie Holmes, for the first two years, and then Barbara Matchey the last year. Both of them were highly professional and enormously competent.

Q: What was your relationship with these particular women? What I'm getting at is this: in some cases, if the women were not married at post, which in effect you weren't, because your husband was off running another embassy, about the only person they could turn to, to sort of chat with after hours whatever, were their secretaries. Because they didn't want to create any ill-feeling by playing favorites among the wives of officers. You see what I mean? But their own secretaries they could, and so some of them came to have very good friendships with their secretaries. Or was your relationship totally different, because you were flying out to visit your husband from time to time?

COON: No, I think I had, I think I had a good relationship particularly with the second secretary, and we joked a lot together. She was very good about dropping things off for me at the house if I had to be home early. Actually she lived very close by and so was always more than willing to drop by and take dictation, or if I had a memorandum of conversation I wanted to do. So that we had a good, warm relationship. It was not, I think, a relationship that you described, in that sense.

Q: I think part of that's a matter of personalities, don't you? Temperaments. And by no means all of the women have done this.

COON: I have a horrid feeling I'm going to begin repeating myself, but did I earlier tell that wonderful story about my first secretary who looked at me as I was leaving for the foreign ministry, and my slip was showing? She said, rather speculatively, "You know, Madame Ambassador, it's easier to tell a lady ambassador, "Your slip is showing," than to tell a male ambassador his fly is open." [Laughter]

Q: [Laughter] That's quite true, isn't it?

What about the wives? Did you see much of the wives? Or just socially?

COON: Just pretty much socially. I had a wonderful DCM's wife, Rika Schmidt, who is a very self-sufficient, independent person, of tremendously wide interests, and a very warm personality. I think we worked out a good relationship where I did not, I think, use her as a substitute wife, the way some single ambassadors of either sex tend to use the DCM's wife. But she was there, you know, in a pinch, when I did need advice. So that was a good relationship.

Q: Was she willing to do the usual women's clubs things?

COON: She wasn't into that very much, but at one point when there was a problem in the women's club, she brought it to my attention and agreed to go on the board, ex-officio, to keep an eye on it. But normally she was not my sort-of substitute on that sort of thing, and there was no reason to expect her to be. In fact, I rather respected her independence.

Q: What did happen then? The women who wanted to belong, kept it up?

COON: Yes. The first meeting of the women's club each year, as I recall, was at the residence, and shortly after I got there, I spoke to the women's club, because I discovered there was just enormous curiosity about me. On another occasion, I had the spouses over to the residence after there would been a security incident. There was a level of tension in the community, and so I had the spouses over to the house to be sure that we had open communication to them.

Q: You have said that the Fourth of July celebration was in February because the summer was the monsoon. What sort of entertaining was that?

COON: That's right. It was usually, you know, a great big affair. I suppose we sent out five or six hundred invitations and probably had four hundred people, something like that.

Q: This was to Bangladeshi . . .

COON: Bangladeshi officials, political figures, senior members of the diplomatic corps, some third country nationals, international organizations, heads of international organizations.

Q: And all Americans?

COON: No, not all Americans. I only had American staff as co-hosts and hostesses, so that it was selected American staff. There was a big gathering at the club, the American club, for-

Q: Americans who wanted to do the usual. What was this, a book-signing thing?

COON: No, it was in the garden of the residence. We had hors d'oeuvres, reception, cocktails.

Q: What time of day did you have it?

COON: In the evening. It took about a week to prepare for the thing, and the GSO put up what we call shamiyanas there. They're kind of tents. And long tables, and red-white-and-blue bunting all over the place. Hired a cast of thousands in terms of servants, it seemed to me. We did most of the hors d'oeuvres at the residence over a period of days. I guess the club did some, too. USIS would put a little bit of an exhibit in one corner of the garden, in the faint hope that it would attract people away from the entrance, and we'd have a receiving line where I would stand with my DCM, DCM's wife, military attachï¿½, and attachï¿½'s wife.

Q: Did you ever find that at the end of those, your hand was swollen?

COON: It was pretty sore, yes.

Q: You can really be wounded, injured, you can go numb.

COON: Gosh, I was glad when those things were over. After the first year, actually, I put it up to my country team, and I said, "Okay, now we've done one, but I think this uses up an awfully large percentage of our representation funds for the year." A number of embassies were moving from the big national day receptions to what they called vins d'honneur, sort of between twelve and one, just the heads of diplomatic missions and the chief of protocol. We could move to this and abandon the big receptions. So I put it to my country team and said, "You know, if this serves your purposes, fine. I think the cost-benefit ratio for me as opposed to the drain on our representational funds, is not something that serves my interests sufficiently."

I gave them a week to think about it, and they came back, after consulting with their staffs, and at the next country team meeting, to a person they voted in favor of continuing national day. It meant the admin officer could have the head of the airport and the head of customs, and the consular officer could have the chief of police, and AID mission could have all sorts of people from obscure ministries that otherwise never-Q: And apparently, to those people it is much better to be invited to the residence of the ambassador than to the home of the people you know.

COON: That's right. So it had an important payoff for the staff. So we bravely went through with it each of the three years I was there.

Q: But they are lethal, aren't they?

COON: I was hoping against hope they'd all say, "Well, we agree with you. It really isn't worth it. We'd rather have the money divided up for representational functions throughout the year."

National days were always a time of crisis, too, it seemed, or there was always a crisis attached to a national day. My mother-in-law was out, incidentally, all three winters-and helped me with national day. I think it was the first year, we had decided to have samosas, which are sort of a triangular Indian pasty, and there was one very old man from old Dhaka who had been a cook when Bangladesh was still part of Pakistan, and was supposed to be the best samosa cook in Dhaka.

We hired him to come in for about three days and sit in a corner of the kitchen and make samosas, about fifteen hundred or two thousand samosas. The night of the party he asked my cook if he could spend the night rather than make the long trip home. We gave permission, and the old man stayed, slept on the floor in my cook's quarters. At five o'clock or six o'clock the next morning when the cook got up, he reached over to shake the old man, and he was stiff. He'd died in his sleep.

Of course, that scared the wits out of the servants. Fortunately, the security officer made the proper arrangements, or the police could have made their lives quite unpleasant. Of course it got in the newspapers that the American ambassador's cook died under mysterious circumstances the night of their national day. Not that it was a substitute servant. [Laughter] That raised eyebrows for a while.

Q: Yes, I think it might. These invitations that you sent said, "in honor of the national day"?

COON: I can't remember exactly what it was.

Q: How would you get around that, if the national day's in July, but you're sending them out in February?

COON: "The Ambassador of the United States of America requests your presence at a reception in honor of"-I don't know whether we said, "national day." I honestly can't remember. We may have said, "President's Day." We timed it so it was between Lincoln and Washington's birthday. It couldn't be as late as the twenty-first, because that was a major Bangladeshi national day.

That was one of the crises of the second year. The twenty-first of February was a national holiday which memorialized the Language Martyrs, three Bangladeshi students who had been killed in 1954 in language riots. It was the very beginning of the movement for Bangladesh against Pakistan. There was usually student unrest before the twenty-first of February, so one year there were some riots in early February. I think I'd scheduled national day for about the fourteenth that year.

The government clamped down and imposed a curfew. This was about two days before our national day reception. The next day there was again a curfew, partially lifted during the daytime, and the day of our national day reception, we literally didn't know until about two in the afternoon, whether or not the government was going to lift the curfew that night.

Well, it became a major political issue since the government wanted to establish the fact that the city was functioning normally. By lifting the curfew so the American Embassy could have their national day reception, they could demonstrate this. Which they did about two in the afternoon.

Q: Oh, my word. The GSO must have been pulling his hair out.

COON: The GSO was absolutely going out of his mind. I mean we had to get entirely ready, and then not know whether it would come off. And you know, there were those thousands of samosas.

Q: Did you have any music there? Any loudspeaker system set up?

COON: No, I don't remember that we did. It was not the practice there to have the national anthems.

Q: Did the head of state come?

COON: No. The head of state did not come; he traditionally dispatched a member of the cabinet. One year we actually had five cabinet ministers, which was a notch on our nightstick that year. The other ambassadors and high commissioners always counted them-the success of your national day depended on the number of ministers you had, and we got up to five one year. [Laughter]

Q: So you were really doing very well. Did they ever have to come around and check out your garden for guns, and that sort of thing?

COON: Yes. I had the president for, either tea or dinner once, and I think they came by and checked, very inconspicuously. Of course, there was a heavy police guard, at the time of national day, a very heavy police guard. After all of the guests had left, we would always invite the police, the VIP detachment, in to have a ginger ale or a coke or a beer.

Q: What did you do for the family holidays of Christmas and Thanksgiving? How did you and your husband work that out?

COON: I think two out of the three years, I spent Christmas in Kathmandu, and the third year, my husband came down, and we spent Christmas in Dhaka.

Q: He had a daughter with him, didn't he, at this time?

COON: I think she was out every Christmas. I can't remember for sure. She took a term off almost every year he was there, so that between the term off and the summertime, she was there at least half the time.

My mother-in-law came out each Christmas. She would spend Christmas in Kathmandu, and then come down to Dhaka and spend most of the rest of January and February with me, and then go back to Kathmandu for a final week. To the absolute delight of the Bangladeshis, she preferred Dhaka to Kathmandu.

Q: Had her husband done any of his anthropological work in that part of the world?

COON: No, he'd never been in Dhaka. He'd been briefly in India and very briefly in Nepal, and she'd been there, too, but not in Bangladesh.

Q: So she had a great interest in all of these cultures?

COON: She had a great interest in seeing as much as she could. The diplomatic corps just loved her, and she loved the social side of things. So she was a great asset.

Q: If you had company, I suppose you weren't terribly lonely then?

COON: Well, I had company for a couple of months in the wintertime, which was rather nice, and then Carl and I got away each summer for three or four weeks of leave at home. But there were fairly long stretches when I was there by myself. I had far less company than Carl did, let's put it that way.

Q: Because of where you were.

COON: Right.

Q: Yes, I know; people go to Kathmandu more easily than they go to Dhaka. Oh, that reminds me, the last time you said that while you were there, the post was raised from a "four" to a "three," which was only logical because it's such a big country. Had that anything to do with you, yourself?

COON: No, I don't think so. And the whole business has been abolished since then.

Q: Yes, I realize that. Your husband's was a Class Four post, I believe?

COON: I think it was raised to a "three," too.

Q: I was just wondering. People always want to know how it is if one gets more than the other; how do they work it out? I always assume that they're adults, and they probably work it out very well, but one has to ask these questions.

Did you ever have any problems with being lonely, and not having anybody that you could talk over your problems with? Because it does put you up there on a plateau, and there is an invisible wall between the chief of a mission and everybody else.

COON: Yes, yes. I think I was awfully glad to see Carl when we got together, almost once a month, because it did give me a chance to talk and let my hair down. It is a somewhat lonely job. There's no two ways about it. I had an awfully good relationship with my DCM, and that makes an enormous amount of difference.

Q: Were you able to see him and his wife socially, much?

COON: I saw them socially, well, not every week, but fairly frequently, yes. And he certainly acted as my host on a lot of the entertaining that I did, whether it was stag or whatever.

Q: Was this because of custom in the country, or was this your idea? To have him as your host.

COON: I think it was my idea, because I found that, as I said earlier, using round tables was much handier. I would often have three round tables, and he would be host at one, and maybe the PAO or the military attach or Carl, if he was down, at another, and then I would be hostess at one.

Q: That's a very good idea. Are they beginning to equip embassies with round tables?

COON: I don't know. It was very simple, because these were three great round circle pieces of wood that they just carted in on removable legs, and once they were covered with a tablecloth they looked all right. They weren't there permanently. We kept them in storage.

Q: How often did you entertain your own staff?

COON: Most of my entertaining involved Bangladeshis and other members of the diplomatic corps, and I entertained my own staff, insofar as they helped me out on these occasions. I tried-and again my secretaries were fairly helpful-to include different junior officers at different times. I don't know how successful I was at that.

Q: In other words, you had a sort of rota system, and you kind of went around the embassy?

COON: I tried to. I tried to have my secretary remind me of people that I had left out. You'd try to have people who had common interests with the guests.

Q: Did it happen that any of your people ever came to you and said, "I wish you would have a dinner for x-y-z, because we're trying to get to him, and this would be a good way to do it?"

COON: Well, very often these dinners were either related to a visiting fireman, or they were purposeful in some other sense, so I would ask for suggestions, particularly from my political counselor and the DCM, on a guest list. Indeed, I welcomed suggestions. Otherwise you tend to sort of bog down with the same people.

Q: What possibilities did you have for a private life?

COON: I don't think an ambassador has a private life. You're kind of a public figure the whole time, in many ways, as long as you're in the country. Now as soon as I got out of the country, and got to Kathmandu, Carl might have been on stage, but I used to fight tooth-and-nail to have as few social events as possible, and just to hole up together or go off on picnics or walks or whatnot. Because that was as close as I could come to being a non-public figure.

Q: And the opposite when he came to visit you. I suppose he relished it, too.

COON: And the opposite when he came to visit me.

Q: Now, this is getting down to it: do you think that he felt as exposed as you felt? Because you were an oddity. People have seen men ambassadors forever.

COON: That's a hard one to answer, because the circumstances were a little different. Obviously, our personalities are different. I think to some extent, you're right, that being a woman ambassador, I was surely not invisible, but being the American ambassador in Kathmandu, male or female, you're not exactly invisible either. He was, to a large extent, a public figure, and his social life was much heavier than mine.

Q: Was it? Partially that may have been because he'd been DCM there before, and he already knew everybody?

COON: Well, yes, and it's just a place where there was an awful lot more social activity, because there were people coming through Nepal all the time, you know, visiting firemen of one sort or another. So I think he certainly was a public figure. Carl always has had a capacity of retreat into his music. He had a room set aside in Kathmandu, which was a private sitting room, right off the bedroom. In fact, it had been the bedroom of the residence, and he moved into the dressing room. We, in effect, slept in a large dressing room. He used what had been the bedroom as a sitting room, which was his music room. And he can retreat into a private world of music.

Q: You said he composes also.

COON: Well, he does now, since he's retired. Listening to music is a very important part of .
Q: Have you anything that you can use in that way?

COON: I played golf some in Dhaka. I played very badly but it meant getting outdoors, at any rate. The golf course was in the military cantonment so it meant it was reasonably private. Walking was difficult in Bangladesh because there were always people. It also meant I didn't have to have a bodyguard when I played golf.

Q: The rest of the time you did have one?

COON: The rest of the time, when I was out of the house, I was supposed to have a bodyguard with me, yes. Provided by the Bangladeshis, a plainclothes police. So everywhere I went I had this-

Q: Did they provide them for all chiefs of mission?

COON: No.

Q: Why particularly the American one?

COON: There had been some threats, and there were when I was there.

Q: From an element of the people?

COON: No. Well, of course, the Libyans and the North Koreans and the Iranians and the Afghans were all in Dhaka.

Q: Why would the Afghans be against us?

COON: Well, it was the communist government. That, I don't think was a particular problem, but the Libyans and the North Koreans and the Iranians were always a trifle unpredictable. And the PLO. There had been an incident with the Egyptian ambassador. I guess it must have been after Camp David-He had a run-in with PLO students. There were some Palestinian students, too. It was not that I was particularly concerned, but the host government preferred to have a bodyguard.

Q: I see. The US did not assign anyone to you over there?

COON: No, we did not have an American. We had an American security officer, but he did not accompany me everywhere I went.

Q: Did you have an armored car?

COON: Partially armored car.

Q: Were you supposed to travel a different way to work each day?

COON: We were supposed to travel a different route to work, but there was one choke point that you couldn't avoid. [Laughter] You had to go past that one point, and there were really only two routes, so we alternated between the two routes.

Q: Did it bother you, these threats?

COON: No. It just goes with the job.

Q: You're very phlegmatic about it, Jane.

COON: Well, it just does. [Laughter]

Q: Was Carl threatened at all?

COON: No, no.

Q: You didn't want to say, "How about swapping here?"[Hearty laughter]

COON: No. You never know how seriously to take these; you know, there are a lot of crackpots out there, and you're not quite sure how seriously to take a crackpot, but then the Islamic Jihad sent me a letter at one point, and I was not prepared to dismiss that as a crackpot. So they beefed up security after that.

Q: I'm surprised, because usually women are not bothered [in a Muslim country].

COON: No.

Q: But you were the authority figure, so even though you were a woman, they thought they had to, I suppose?

COON: Well, I was never, in fact, bothered.

Outside of Dhaka, the Bangladeshis always insisted on providing a jeep-load of police to either precede or follow on-generally follow on, because of the dust-the ambassadorial vehicle, which would go hurtling down these brick roads at about eighteen miles an hour.

Q: When you had to travel around in jeeps, did you have to fly a flag on the jeep?

COON: [Laughter] Yes, we'd fly a flag. There's a thing mounted on the front-it was a kind of comfortable jeep, but it was a jeep, and there would be a flag mounted on that, and a jeep-full of Bangladeshi policemen with their pre-World War II rifles behind. Then every time I'd pull up at a guest house, there would be a guard of honor from the police, and I would have to review the guard of honor, which meant standing on a concrete block while they went through an exercise of banging their guns and putting them over their shoulders, whatever it is. Presenting arms, I guess it's called. At the crucial moment, I would say, "Dismiss," and they would all sort of march off.

One feels like a perfect fool under these circumstances, but it is tolerable unless you have on-lookers-which happened on one occasion when two or three of my children were visiting, and two of my daughters stood directly behind the policemen and made faces at me while I was reviewing the guard. [Laughter]

Q: Children can be incredible! And the poor souls, they're taking it all so very seriously. What impact on you, on your personal feelings and your image of yourself did it have, having all this power?

COON: All this power. [Laughter]

Q: Well, you do. I mean, let's face it, a chief of mission is a very powerful individual. You're little America out there. You are the president, in effect.

COON: There are a couple of things you have to remember: one is that it goes with the office, and not you as a person, so you have to exercise a fair amount of care in not getting a swelled head. That it is not you, Jane Coon, but it is the American ambassador that the whole thing is about. On the other hand, I think I would be considerably less than honest if I didn't say that I just thoroughly enjoyed the job. There isn't a better job in the world. It's a marvelous job. There you are, after all of these years in the bureaucracy, not having to clear every blessed thing. Being in charge of something.

Q: Having your word be what goes.

COON: Well, it's less that, because I think you do have to take into account a lot. But it is a wonderful job. It was great fun.

Q: Not because of the perks, the physical perks that go with it, but just the freedom, you mean?

COON: No, it's not so much the physical perks as it is the-gosh, what is it? Well, I suppose we all join the Foreign Service because we want to have something to do with the formulation and implementation of American foreign policy abroad. When you reach the chief of mission level, there you are abroad, and you may not be making the largest waves in the ocean, because Bangladesh is not the largest continent in the firmament, but you are orchestrating a relationship. And that is a lot of fun.

Q: Must be. Did you and your husband find that, in addition to your own individual jobs, you had to pay attention to the other one's job, too? Did you ever have to go up there and sort of sort out things in his residence, or did he ever have to come down and be at a particular function that you needed to have a spouse for?

COON: I'm still thinking about that last question, to be perfectly honest.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry. Finish that by all means.

COON: There was another element that I was just thinking about. I suppose in any kind of foreign service work, there is a lot of variety in any given day, but as an ambassador, you deal with an unbelievable amount of variety. Because it's not just the political section or the economic section, it's AID and USIS and the government of Bangladesh and all of the ministries of the government of Bangladesh, and the economic section, and the political section. I remember making a note-somebody asked me once what an ambassador did during a day, and I made a note of the incredible variety of things that came across my desk, and it was astonishing.

Q: Is it a little bit like putting the pieces together of a puzzle? And you're the only one that has the solution?

COON: To some extent, yes. You're not always putting the pieces together, because you don't have total control of the puzzle. Let's put it that way. I mean, the relationship is a relationship which the government of Bangladesh has something to do with, too, or many other countries. But yes, I think you have an overview which nobody else has, and that makes a difference.

Q: And that must be fun, too.

COON: And that's fun, yes. That's a lot of fun, because you're not constrained. This is something, I think that's one of the things career ambassadors have to learn, that theirs is an overview position. They're not a super-political officer or a super-econ officer. They are overseeing all of the work of the mission.

Q: Could you possibly-I know every day was different-but could you possibly give me a typical day? If you can dredge up from your memory . . .

COON: Oh, my stars. It's hard to dredge up from the memory, but I'd get up and listen to VOA at breakfast, usually having mangoes in the mango season, or papaya the rest of the year.

Q: How early did you have to get up? Was it an early day?

COON: My recollection is that I-I'm always a fairly early riser, six-thirty or something like that. After listening to VOA or BBC, I'd read the wireless file and the local newspapers, and then head into the office by eight-thirty or so. My car and driver and bodyguard would show up, and I would go about eight miles into town. One of the things that was rather good for ambassadorial hubris, was that my great black car would pull up in the circular driveway in front of the building in which the embassy was located. We rented the fourth and fifth floor of this perfectly dreadful building. (There's now a new chancery under construction). And there was always a police guard in the rotunda of the building one ground floor. As my car would drive up, the police guard of half a dozen-two or three of whom had been sound asleep on the bench-would finally leap into some sort of vertical position and whack their rifles on the floor in anything but unison.

And I would be ushered out of my car, march with my bodyguard across the rotunda up to the elevator. I had been told by the operator, with great pride, that it was the oldest elevator in Dhaka. And the button didn't work. So having marched with great dignity, my bodyguard would pound upon the elevator door until he attracted enough attention for the operator to bring it down. [Laughter] You would mount with all of your ambassadorial dignity intact, of course, to the third floor, where for security reasons you had to get off, and then walk up to the fourth.

Then I guess I'd start out by reading the telegrams, and on this particular day, perhaps there was a country team meeting, which lasted for an hour. Following country team, I might make some notes for myself from an instruction from Washington and go off to the foreign ministry with a junior officer along as note taker, to make a representation on some U.N. issue to the foreign secretary.

Q: You said you'd make notes for yourself on this representation?

COON: I would frequently make little notes to myself from Washington's instruction. Or have my secretary, if there was any detail involved, prepare what's known as a "non-paper." Where you would note down your talking points on a piece of paper, then leave it with the foreign secretary or the foreign minister, which saved all kinds of trouble, in terms of his side taking notes.

Q: And you would take a younger officer, a junior?

COON: I would generally take a young officer with me to be my note taker. I'd come back and perhaps the AID director would come over for a meeting on the-for example, the flood situation. [Telephone interruption] Say a Bangladeshi request for additional food assistance, in light of the recent floods. I might go home for lunch, and a short rest if I knew I was going to be going out that evening to a couple of functions.

Q: About how long would you give yourself for lunch?

COON: It depended. If I had to cocktails and dinner at night, I would sometimes give myself an hour and a half to rest. Eat and rest. Otherwise I might eat in the embassy snack bar, where I tried to eat with different groups of people, or I might have a business luncheon.

Q: When you had a business luncheon, it was more than an hour, I'm sure.

COON: Oh, yes.

Q: Did you have many business luncheons at the residence?

COON: Not a lot, because it was a fair distance.

Q: Went to restaurants, did you?

COON: Either that or was invited out by someone else. Occasionally I went to a restaurant, and occasionally home.

I might come back to the chancery at that point and receive a call from a newly arrived ambassador from, say, an Eastern European country, followed by a session with the DCM and the security officer over reports that the embassy had received that there was going to be some civil unrest and strikes in downtown Dhaka, not directed at the Americans but in the vicinity of the embassy. We'd have to make a decision on whether or not the staff should come to work, should come to work late, or what steps we needed to take to alert people.

Then on my way home, I might stop by and have a lengthy tea and chat with either a Bangladeshi political contact or with an ambassadorial colleague to discuss what was happening politically.

And go off to India national day, or a reception, and conclude the day with dinner at my house for a visiting Congressional staffer and key people from the ministries of food and agriculture.

Q: And then you'd tumble into bed around twelve o'clock. Whew! About how often did you go out, or have people in?

COON: It varied a lot by season. In the cold weather there was more entertaining, and you'd be out or entertaining probably four times a week, five times a week, maybe.

Q: Of course you could have two or three things in an evening, couldn't you?

COON: Yes, you might have more than one thing.

Q: There might even be more than one national thing to go to.

COON: Yes, although as I said, some of the missions were mercifully changing over to the vin d'honneur system, which meant only just an hour, from twelve to one.

Q: And you'd just zip over there at noon, sign their book?

COON: Just zip over there, sign the book, have a glass of champagne.

Q: Did you find that some evenings you thought, "Oh, I just simply cannot get dressed and go out one more time this week"?

COON: [Laughter] No. I don't know, that's just something you had to do.

Q: How many embassies were there, there?

COON: We had about thirty-five, forty missions.

Q: Did you go to most of the national days?

COON: I went to most of the national days. During that period we were not going to Soviet National Day, and of course we weren't seeing the North Koreans or the Libyans. Although the Iraqi ambassador and I got on very nicely, we didn't go to each others' national days, as I recall, because our countries didn't have diplomatic relations. There were one or two others.

Q: What about clothing? Did you find that you had to conform in your clothing to any customs?

COON: Well, I was very careful to dress rather conservatively. There were two guiding considerations. One was comfort, which meant light cottons, and two was modesty, which meant almost always long sleeves and high necks.

Q: High necks and long sleeves-how did you find them?

COON: Fairly high necks; I don't mean terribly high necks. I wore conservative cotton dresses to work most days.

Q: Did you find actual dresses, or did you have to use, what do they call those things, "hostess gown" type things?

COON: Oh, for the evening,-I discovered in Delhi a source for some very nice long dresses, embroidered dresses that were being done by a boutique for Bloomingdale's. In Delhi they were only about fourteen dollars apiece. So I got several of those. I also wore short dresses in the evening

The best thing about Dhaka, so far as dress was concerned-I am not exactly a fashion plate, nor have I ever been a fashion plate, but for the first time in my life, I set the styles. You see, I never could wear the wrong thing. It was absolutely glorious. [Laughter]

Q: That's wonderful! You said you found your own source for these long dresses, because to find long dresses of a thin material that aren't decolletï¿½ is very difficult sometimes.

COON: Yes, and these were all quite high-necked.

Q: What you wore in the daytime sounds very much like shirtwaist dresses. Did you find pure cotton was the best?

COON: Yes.

Q: Could you find pure cotton?

COON: I shopped like mad every time I came back here. I'd shop like mad for pure cotton, because it made all the difference, I think. Polyester is just awful. And you don't have to worry about laundry there. You have a dhobi-somebody to do your laundry for you.

Q: I know we talked about how the residence was run, but how many servants did you have, did the embassy provide?

COON: We had a full-time cook, and two bearers, and the part-time dhobi, who did the washing and ironing, came twice or three times a week, I can't remember which-and a couple of gardeners. I don't think I had an outside sweeper; I guess the gardeners did it.

Q: Is this on the caste system the way it is in India?

COON: To some extent, yes. My staff inside, the cook and the two bearers, all three were men, and two were Muslim, and one was a Christian, and I think the gardeners were Christians, actually. And then of course there was a chowkidar-a guard on the gate that was provided by the embassy, plus the police guards.

Q: Of course you had a chauffeur.

COON: And a chauffeur. Sounds like a cast of thousands.

Q: Oh, I know, but it's absolutely essential to keep the place going. Did you have any health problems out there?

COON: I was extraordinarily healthy; no. I had, you know, an upset stomach a couple of times, a touch of dysentery.

Q: Is there a great history of dysentery out there?

COON: Yes.

Q: Amoebas, and things like that?

COON: Bangladesh still has a very high incidence of cholera. The United States had sponsored a research institution in Dhaka from the late fifties known as the cholera lab. It did much of the early research on cholera, which has led to the oral rehydration method of treatment for diarrheal diseases.

Q: Oh, was that so? That came through the-

COON: Yes. It came from Dhaka. The cholera lab was transformed in the late seventies into an international lab, structured a little bit like the Rice Research Institute or the Philippines Simmet, the wheat research center in Mexico, with an international board of directors. It had the wonderful name of the ICDDRB, the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh. They branched out from cholera and were working on a number of other diarrheal diseases. Of course, there's a tremendously high incidence of diarrheal diseases, and it's a major cause of infant mortality. So you felt you had some of the better medical talent around for those occasional bouts of diarrhea.

Q: They understand their own microbes, too.

COON: That's right.

Q: Were you given any special awards when you were there?

COON: I don't remember any, no. Oh, I got the performance pay a couple of years, I think. Either once or twice.

Q: Oh, yes. I remember seeing that in the State Department magazine. You got it a couple of times.

COON: Did I get it a couple of times?

Q: Yes, you did. I can remember checking on it. You know, if you happen to know somebody, the name always leaps out at you. I wondered if the Bangladeshi made any awards. Some countries never do, and other countries fall all over themselves giving ribbons and things.

COON: No, no. They do not.

Q: Were there any things that you had to leave unfinished when-well, naturally this is an ongoing thing-but were there problems that you just couldn't resolve while you were there? Or did you feel that you got a handle on most everything you wanted to?

COON: Anything like this is an ongoing situation. As I left, there had been fairly severe floods in June and July of that year, and it was very much up in the air as to what the situation was with respect to food requirements.

Q: But the programs for which you had had responsibility, you felt they were well in train?

COON: Many of them had started before I got there, and we moved them along, and they continued after I left, I'm sure. I think it's relatively rare for an ambassador to actually initiate a totally new program or policy. There are rare moments when this happens.

Q: But as you looked back, when you were leaving, how did you feel about the job you had done?

COON: I looked back, and I felt, you know, a sense of very real satisfaction. The president very kindly gave a private dinner for me, which he did not do for any but a few ambassadors. I think I generally felt very good about it.

Q: I wonder if we could just hop back a bit, and let me ask you again that question that I had asked before: did you have to have any responsibility as a spouse for your husband's mission?

COON: Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, we didn't get back to that.

Q: Oh, that's all right. It's just that you're the only one who can answer this.

COON: Both Carl and I, I think I mentioned before, had what we called household managers, so that I had a sense that he was well looked after. I wasn't going to go up there with white gloves and run my finger over things. I mean occasionally I'd go up, and I would make suggestions. Carl is not somebody who is terribly conscious of his physical surroundings, so that it occasionally took a little bit of attention.

The only time when it was fairly important, was after His Majesty and Her Majesty made their state visit to the United States. As a token of their appreciation for Carl's role in this, they indicated that they would be happy to accept an invitation to dinner. One never quite knew when they were going to do this, so that we had only about four days' notice that Their Majesties had accepted Carl's long-standing invitation for dinner, and would be happy to come on such-and-such a night.

So I whipped up from Dhaka the day beforehand and pretty much did the planning for that, working with his resident manager. When Their Majesties came to dinner, it was always considered to be a confidential event that others didn't know about. I can remember conferring with the principal Nepalese who worked for the GSO-in fact he was so good that he ran the whole GSO section, really. I decided to use a small parlor instead of the dining room, because the dining room for four of us was going to be rather cavernous. It meant rewiring, getting some wires laid down for lamps and so on, so I asked him to come over, no explanation of why, but I said I wanted to do a certain amount of rewiring in that room, and I wanted it done very quickly.

He couldn't have been more attentive and more helpful and more cooperative, and before he left, he looked at me and he said, "Do you have such-and-such brand of cigars and such-and-such kind of brandy?" Which he knew was precisely what His Majesty drank and smoked. [Laughter] So that went well.

That was about the only time I remember actually. Carl had his national day in the winter, too, a little after mine. Anyway, I did not go up for his national day, and he did not come down for mine.

Q: This particular incident, when the King and Queen came, did you get a frantic call from your husband, saying, "For heaven's sakes, come and cope with this"?

COON: Well, it was sort of odd because we had been trekking and then gone on to a conference in Delhi. I can't remember-the deputy secretary or the secretary, maybe was coming through Delhi, and the South Asian ambassadors all gathered. I was returning to my post then. I could either go Delhi-Calcutta-Dhaka, or I could Delhi-Kathmandu-Dhaka, and it was slightly more expensive but more convenient to go Delhi-Kathmandu-Dhaka. Calcutta airport was awful. So I was on my way back to my post, and when we landed in Kathmandu from Delhi, Carl's DCM came out and said that His Majesty had accepted. This was on a Monday and His Majesty had accepted for dinner on Thursday. Well, I had to get back to my post, because I'd been away. So I went down and spent Monday and Tuesday, and came up Wednesday afternoon. And His Majesty came on Thursday, as I remember.

Q: Cutting it a bit fine.

COON: So I was cutting it a bit fine, but we made it. Also, every time I went up to Kathmandu I would take a bag of shrimp or crab. We had these soft refrigerator bags, and my cook would pick five or six dozen crabs, and I would take crabmeat and shrimp and other seafood up to Carl. He became very popular in Kathmandu for the table he set, because seafood was very uncommon there. In exchange, Carl had an avocado tree from which he must have gotten a thousand avocados one year, and I would take to Dhaka avocados and more temperate fruits.

Q: Very nice. In effect then, your going up there really was the only way you had to get away from this goldfish bowl existence.

COON: That's right.

Q: And vice versa for your husband. Any last things you want to say about your tour as an ambassador, because it was a high point in your life, I assume.

COON: Yes, yes. No, I can't-Q: Any changes you would make, if you could go back and do it over again?

COON: Oh, heavens. I can't imagine anyone doing that job and not thinking afterward that they would have done something a little differently; of course you would do things differently.

Q: Sure. But nothing major?

COON: I don't, you know. One's not going to do it again, so not to worry.

Q: Nothing that you thought, "Oh, that was such a terrible mistake, I've got to warn everybody: don't try that, because it doesn't work."

COON: No, no.

Q: By the time you get to be a chief of mission, when you've gone up through the service, you pretty much know how to behave-how to handle things?

COON: Well, you hope you do. I mean, there's always going to be a gaffe or two, let's face it.

Q: Did you have any adjustment problems when you came back?

COON: Probably the wisest thing we did, and I look back on it and still marvel at our good sense, was the arrangements we made for a holiday on the way home. We have a couple of very good friends who have a connection with Alaska. We had canoed down the Yukon with them on another vacation. We arranged that we would leave our posts on the same day and meet them in Fairbanks, Alaska, where they had arranged a canoe trip down the Porcupine, a tributary of the Yukon.

We had planned the trip the previous summer, I guess, when we'd been home, but I somehow thought the odds were about one in a hundred that we could actually pull this off. Carl and I both scheduled our departure for the third of August. Carl took the Royal Nepal flight from Kathmandu, which stopped in Dhaka, and I got on in Dhaka. I was probably the only chief of mission to ever leave Dhaka with long underwear and a down jacket in her hand luggage. [Laughter] We flew to Hong Kong, spent the night, and then the next day got on a plane, and flew, it seemed like forever, to Seattle and Fairbanks, where we met our friends, and about three days later, we were north of the Arctic Circle in the Yukon territory at a place called Old Crow We had a small plane fly in a couple of canoes and a couple of kayaks for us.

And we spent the next two weeks on a river entirely north of the Arctic Circle being entirely physical. And with no people. That was the best therapy I think anybody could ever have had.

Q: Yes, I would think so, too. Plus the fact it was a decompression chamber. And cooled off.

COON: And more mosquitoes than people. For ten days we literally didn't see another person-out of the fourteen days. So that was a wonderful decompression because both of us were exhausted. You know, packing and the farewell parties and all of that.

Q: How did you manage to finish your posts at the same time?

COON: We had begun in '81 within about six weeks of each other, and we managed to leave by sort of telling the Department over and over again for the previous six or eight months that we would be leaving on the third of August. Well, it's amazing how the Department gets used to a notion, if you just tell them often enough. [Laughter] And we worked it out with both of our DCMs. Mine took his home leave or vacation early.

Q: How do you think Carl felt about you being an ambassador at the same time he was an ambassador? Do you suppose he felt it took away from his accomplishment?

COON: No, I think he was delighted. I think he realized that I hadn't-particularly the latter part of the nine years I was out-had not been altogether happy in a spousely condition, you know, not working. So I think he was delighted that I had my post and he had his post. It's not something I think we'd necessarily want to repeat, because I don't think we enjoyed being separated that much and that long.

Q: Didn't it cost you an awful lot of money flying back and forth all the time like that?

COON: Well, it was about a hundred and fifty dollars or a hundred and sixty dollars a round-trip.

Q: That's not too bad, but still you had to do it twelve times a year. You went up and he came back.

COON: We didn't do it twelve times a year because we had our home leave together. If we'd been in Vienna we probably would have spent that much on the opera, and there was a great shortage of that sort of thing. There wasn't much else you spent money on at those posts.

Q: Did you find, when you finally did get together, that you just didn't want to talk about the office at all, or did you used to save up things, and say, "I'll ask Carl how he would react?"

COON: We tended to talk shop. And, Ann, I think I got ideas that I tried out in Dhaka from him, and he got ideas that he tried out in Kathmandu from me.

Q: I think it's wonderful, because you're the only ones that I know of where the Service did get two, but not for the price of one. They had to pay double!

COON: Yes, thank heaven. But they got more than two for the price of two, because we were both learning from each other. It did not occur to me before I went out just how useful this would be. I think there were a lot of mistakes I might otherwise have made or he might otherwise have made, but if one of us made them first, the other one was less likely to.

Q: That's right; you wouldn't both make the same ones. How about when you came back here? Did you enjoy your next assignment?

COON: Yes. I pretty much spent a year writing about the subcontinent, and I think I discovered that I'm not by temperament a research person, but I found it a very useful year intellectually.

Q: That was at the-

COON: At the American Enterprise Institute. Then subsequent to that I became dean of professional studies at the Foreign Service Institute, which I also found a very interesting and stimulating job.

Q: Do you want to comment on that? What your main duties were?

COON: Essentially, we were attempting to introduce a new curriculum for Foreign Service professional studies. I was attempting to bring into the process of curriculum design, not only the knowledge of Foreign Service officers, but some of the methodological skills of professional trainers. So I was trying to marry professional trainers and Foreign Service officers. I found that a very interesting management job.

Q: Why did you decide to retire? Why now?

COON: Why now? I think a variety of things. Carl had retired, and I couldn't quite visualize Carl-even assuming I got another embassy-in a dependent spouse role. Although presumably some of this computer business could be portable, I think it would be difficult. And I had reached a point where the bureaucracy was no longer fun, and when that happens it's time to get out. It just felt right to move on to something else.

Q: You say you couldn't see your husband in a spousal role. Did that ever make you cross? Because you certainly had to be in a spousal role for long enough.

COON: [Laughter] No, because I think this was combining with a sense that I'd sort of felt-

Q: You'd had it yourself. Do you feel that, while this was a high point of your career, being an ambassador, and in his career, his being an ambassador, that you really sacrificed quite a bit those years?

COON: Actually, I think I probably sacrificed more during the period when I was an office director and deputy assistant secretary, because I was working so terribly hard, and that, particularly the last two years there, '79 to '81, I neglected my family. In terms of not just my time, but attention and focus.

Q: Sure, sure. I'm interested in this, because you're not the only one who has discussed this: of the ones who are married, there seems to be terrible guilt feelings among these very high-achieving women, and I'm sure that their husbands don't feel any guilt if they don't get home in time to take care of the family.

COON: That's right; that's right. Yes. I felt very guilty about those years, particularly, that four years from '77 to '81. My children were-the youngest was-let's see, Ellen graduated from Andover in '79, and Richard in '81, so it wasn't as if they were little, and they were both in boarding school-but I still felt guilty!

You know, I can remember the Thanksgiving of 1979. On Wednesday before Thanksgiving the embassy in Islamabad was overrun. The kids were all home for Thanksgiving, and I managed to stagger in, I think, for about an hour and a half for Thanksgiving dinner, and the rest of the weekend I was in the office. And, okay, you know they understand that it's a crisis, but still . . .

Q: But still . . . You know there were things they wanted to ask you about.

COON: That's right. Yes.

Q: A mother's the linchpin in the family, there's no question about that. But I just wonder if this is going to always go on. Is there no way that men can share the emotional burden of the children as well?

COON: Carl changed his views, very radically, when he was widowed. He had always been, you know, home at seven o'clock or seven-thirty, and his wife was supposed to have the kids under control and fed and be able to sit down and have a martini with him. When she died, he realized that he had left the management and the raising of the children almost entirely to his wife.

Q: Which I think all men of his generation did.

COON: Exactly. All men of his generation. He changed his pattern a good deal. Even after we were married, there were some things that I could not substitute for. But more than that, I think he realized he just didn't want to live that way anymore. His relationship now with the youngest children-who were quite young at the time, and therefore he has spent much more time with-is really quite different than his relationship with the four older ones. So that I think he has a slight sense of guilt about that.

Q: In fact, were we to ask him, he might give replies very similar to yours. It's too bad that somebody has to learn at such a terrible price. What do you look forward to doing, now that you're going to be a woman of leisure?

COON: Well, I don't plan to make up my mind too soon and too quickly. I'm going to try out a variety of things, and look around, and not commit myself too soon. At this stage, I don't want another full-time job. Carl and I want to have a little time to travel. So we'll see. Maybe I'll take up carpentry.

Q: Are you really going to do some gardening?

COON: Yes, I think I'll do some gardening. Q: Right now, you said, you're just reveling in-

COON: Right now is sort of a euphoric moment. I have a feeling if you came back in three months, it might be quite different. To discover you can go to stores when they aren't crowded, on days other than Saturdays, is quite a revelation.

Q: Would you have any advice to give to young women who want a career in the Foreign Service?

COON: Well, I think I was pretty lucky in terms of being able to combine family and career. I think it can be done, obviously, but I don't think it's very easy. For women to think they can have it all, I'm not sure that many of them will be able to do so; whether they come in as tandems and look forward to a joint career with their husbands, or whether they come in as singles, and lose out on family life. I don't know. It is not as easy as a lot of women think, and a lot of us thought, perhaps, in the '70s that it would somehow be.

Q: Roz Ridgway [Ambassador Rozanne Ridgway] feels that, in her case at least, had she been married earlier, she would not have become an ambassador.

COON: Why, I wonder?

Q: Had she married at a younger age, she feels she would have had to give more than she's now giving to a marriage, because you have to. Well, you did, Jane. You gave up the service for nine years. That's what she means. You did make it, but let's face it, you are the exception. Most people aren't as capable as you, and it's a combination of things.

COON: Of course, it's a combination of things.

Q: You're the ultimate tandem. I wonder if there will be any others.

COON: I don't know.

Q: It certainly is an unusual thing. But anyway, that's what she said. She just didn't think that it would be possible, and with the pressures that are now-

COON: The pressures on her must just be phenomenal.

Q: Oh, they are terrible.

COON: I mean she must be working about a twenty-seven hour day, as well organized as she is.

Q: Then I will ask you the last question I ask-

COON: On the other hand, you know what? I would much rather be married than not, because, you know, time comes for all of us when we have to retire, and it's an awful lot nicer having someone there.

Q: Are you saying you would rather be married-well, how can you say that, because you did make ambassador?

COON: Either or. Okay, I'd like to have it both ways. [Laughter] That's right. But I'm not saying it's very easy to have it both ways.

Q: No, no, it can't be. Because you have to pay in some way, and that's what you're telling young women: that they've got to expect it. Would you consider that the life is interesting enough, and worthwhile enough, that it's worth-

COON: What, Foreign Service?

Q: Foreign Service.

COON: Oh, sure.

Q: Worth doing again. In other words, you would not discourage anyone from coming in?

COON: No. I am not a cynic. I think obviously things have changed since I was a young officer. The security environment I think is very, very different, so that our missions abroad in many areas are almost fortresses, and I think that changes life for many people in the Foreign Service. It inhibits, perhaps more than is necessary, getting out and traveling and getting around in the country to which you're assigned. I think there's some very good people coming into the Foreign Service now; I've seen in this present job. I've been in charge of the-[Interruption]

Q: The very last question is, what do you consider the most significant achievement in your life?

COON: Oh, good heavens!

Q: I thought you'd like that.

COON: Whew! What do I consider the most significant? I don't think I can pin it down to one thing, because I think there were things in my professional life, and I think there were things in my personal life, particularly on the family side. And I'm very struck by the fact that I'm not sure one ever knows what one's most significant achievement is.

I was just back at my fortieth reunion at Northfield, my secondary school, and I was recalling an Old Testament teacher, and an incident in her class, which remains vivid in my memory, and I attribute to that incident my long-standing interest in history. Now I, from my own egotistical point of view, would consider that a significant achievement in her life. [Laughter] But I'm sure she didn't think of it that way.

Q: Oh, maybe she did, Jane. Maybe she did.

COON: She probably wouldn't have remembered it.

Q: That she was able to influence so many young people.

COON: I mean which and how many of the people that you've come in contact with, at one time or another, has one influenced?

Q: Then, what's given you the most satisfaction? That might be another way of putting it.

COON: What's given me the most satisfaction? Okay, apart from my marriage to Carl-that's probably the greatest satisfaction-apart from that, possibly . . . When one becomes the instant stepmother of six, there are some rocky times. I think, possibly the different but generally very, very satisfying relationship I have with the children now. So I guess that comes at least in part from the private life, but I have a lot of satisfaction in what I've done, too, in public life.

Q: In a real way, you did have it all.

COON: Yes, yes.

Q: Well, I thank you very much for all of your cooperation.

COON: Well, you are very welcome.

End of interview