

JAMES N. CORTADA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: September 1, 1992

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Q: Today is September 1, 1992. This is an interview with James N. Cortada. This interview is being done at his home in Orange, Virginia, and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. This is being done on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program Jim, I wonder if you could tell me about your background, where did you come from, where were you educated, when were you born and where?

CORTADA: I am a native of New York City. Born May 10, 1914. My father was born in Puerto Rico, and his father was also Puerto Rican of Catalan parents. His mother was British, and father went to New York sometime around 1888, and established himself there except for travel here and there. He was one of the first American merchants who opened up the South American markets for American goods in 1899 and the early 1900s. My mother whose name was America was born in Cuba. Her father, my grandfather and my great-uncle were among the chief organizers of the rebellion in Eastern Cuba which led to its independence. Colonel Diego Palacios, my great-uncle and my grandfather, Major Nicolas Colas were key figures in it. They came from plantation families. Their ancestors, one generation removed, were also instigators of the Ten Years Rebellion of Cuba against Spain.

Q: This was in the 18...

CORTADA: That was around 1862 to 1872. That was after the Nareiso Lopez Expedition.

Q: Yes he was before...

Q: The Blocked listing and ...?

CORTADA: The Blocked listing and all of that, and there was no time there to train anybody so, there was a question of bicultural background...and a certain amount of undercover work that went into it. And the other job they wanted filled called for a certain amount of commodity control for which a good friend of mine, Dolphie Horne, manager of the P&O steamship company in Havana, was very well qualified. Dolphie was about 32 years old and I, by this time was around 28 or 29. The result was that Vice Consul (FSO) John Hoover who later became a very close friend, and who was the officer in charge of that unit turned to Shirley and said: "Shirley, you have been here all your life, is there anybody here that we can get who can qualify for the job. You know, parents should be American, he should be bicultural and all that kind of thing and know every merchant in the place." Shirley replied: "Well, I went out on a date with Jimmy Cortada a few days ago, and he said he was going off to Miami to join the navy. I don't know whether he's still here." John wrote me a letter - I was still in Havana - that he would like to discuss a matter of possible mutual interest, that kind of thing. Well, I was interviewed by John. I was very leery about getting into this. I wanted to go off to war. I had no desire to get into any Embassy or Consulate, or anything like that. But John pointed out to me that one had the obligation to serve one's country where one was best suited. In this particular situation, he indicated I was the candidate for it. Well I agreed provided that I would be given the opportunity to go to Miami to volunteer for the navy, at least, say, the following year. That's how it happened. So I wound up in the Embassy chasing down phalangists and black money transfers and all that kind of business. About a year later I went to Miami and took the exams for a Navy commission. I know damn well I passed them. The commander of the recruiting office was an American businessman from Havana who was an old friend. Well in time I got back a letter from the Navy, ambiguous, I still have it, which said in effect, "Get lost." Turned down by the Navy and having become deeply interested in our work, I opted to stay in the foreign service. Also, Shirley and I became romantically engaged after my turn down and were married. Still are! Harold Tewell as Consul General in the Embassy and learning about my F.S. aspiration, told me: "You've got all the experience that's necessary, but one day somebody's going to say: "Jimmy Cortada never got a degree and so and so has one." And the responsibility is going to go to the fellow who has it because yours was an unfinished business. Well, the president of the Havana Business College, which I had helped found and organize had remained a very close friend. We used to play golf at the Havana Country Club every weekend. I told him that I wanted to register in the college night sessions and get my degree. He turned around to me and said: "I'll let you do that only under one condition." I asked: "What is that?" "It's that you teach each course that you're gonna take and so that there's no question about its legitimacy, the instructor will sit in these as a student instead of you." So frankly, I taught my last 30 credit hours, at night already married, and with a child. So, that's how I got my bachelor's degree.

Q: I'd just like to get a little feeling for the two Ambassadors when you were in Havana. Spruille Braden and R. Henry Norweb.

CORTADA: Actually, there was a third one but unfortunately I left after he'd been there only a week, but I forget his name.

Q: These were two men who were quite well known. What was your impression of them?

CORTADA: Both extraordinary. Each in his own way. Spruille Braden was a mining engineer who had made a substantial fortune in Chile. He married a Chilean lady, an absolutely splendid lady, a lady to her fingertips. The best that you can find in that Spanish culture. He had had a lot of experience in South America. He had been the key figure in settling that Chaco war. He was a dynamic individual. He was the motion picture image of a certain kind of Ambassador, very florid-faced, reddish-haired type, bulky, squared-jaw, originally from New York, dynamic, he was perpetual motion, very astute. He understood the Cuban mentality very well because of his experience in Latin America, and being married to a Latin American woman. Very easy to get along with. There was no abuse there of any kind. And as I said, his wife was a delight. He was very outgoing, massive entertainment. Very talented. R. Henry Norweb was also a fascinating character, but a completely different cut of cloth. R. Henry Norweb was married to a lady who I believe was the principal at interest at the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Very wealthy. Norweb had been born in England, and in his physical appearance was a prototype of a Sir Anthony Eden. Same kind of personality, quiet, very dignified. He was well off in his own right, had substantial holdings in General Motors, as I seem to recall, and also was a pleasure to work with. He was also very astute. And one thing I learned from him, was the dignity with which an Ambassador can really function, because, while Spruille Braden was a gentleman, he was really a gentleman in the 1890 American sense of the word. Whereas R. Henry Norweb was very quiet, very dignified, believed in very quiet diplomacy, no fanfare. His entertainment was modest. I remember he was an expert in dry martinis. He prepared his dry martinis months in advance and let them gel, so that when he served them, they were really exquisite. And none of this ice business. They had to be the real McCoy. His drafting ability, his ability to write English was excellent. Now, his wife was what we used to refer to in the Foreign Service as a tiger.

Q: One of the dragons, yeah.

CORTADA: She was one of the dragons. But, we never had any problems with her. As a matter of fact, my wife had been under Spruille Braden, his social secretary. Her family was very prominent in Havana. Her uncle, Johnny Duys, had been president of the Chamber of Commerce. They knew the ropes. So that she and my wife, despite the fact that she could have been my wife's grandmother, got along very, very well. But she was a dragon lady.

Q: What was the political situation. We've gotta sort of move on. But, before we do that, I am wondering...in Cuba, I mean...

Q: Well, you left Havana in 1948, and then you went to Barcelona?

Q: Well now, how did this...when you left Havana in 1948...?

CORTADA: Well, partly because of my participation in that, John Evans asked that I be sent to the Department of Commerce for one year's training in international commodities movements and partly because I had been very effective in Havana in promoting trade. I had written more than 120 short form market surveys and really had played quite a role in developing trade for American business in Havana during those years. So they thought, John Evans thought, but this man needs some refining. I was assigned to John Evan's and E. Paul Hawk's division for one whole year. But during that year, I attended the Foreign Service Institute in the evenings and took every course available, anthropology, labor, economics, you name it. Also, I obtained permission to participate in the Brookings Institute Seminars under Redvers Opie a colleague of Lord Keynes who explained to senior officers of the Foreign Service how the Marshall Plan was being developed. This subsequently had an important effect on my role in Barcelona, about two years later.

Q: You served in Barcelona from 1941 to 1955.

CORTADA: No, no. I served in Havana from 1942 to 1948, then a year in Washington, then in Barcelona from 49 to 51. But you see, my assignment to Barcelona was also a fluke. The Department of Commerce was pressing to get better business relations with Spain. In those days, Franco was in the diplomatic dog house. We only had a Chargé d'Affaires. It was Culbertson, Paul Culbertson. And the British had the same thing, and the French. But, (they were already thinking) in the State Department, about a change in policy. There was an interest in the government on finding out just what was the condition of Spanish industry. And most of that was in Barcelona. Well, they looked around and there was no economist who could speak Spanish and was available for the job, because there had been no recruiting during the war years. The Department of Commerce interested in promoting trade with Spain sent a note to the State Department to the effect that "Look, wait a minute, we got this young man here. We've trained him, and he's really talented. He's also been through the Brookings course. We think he could handle the task very well." So, despite the fact that I was about 2 or 3 ranks too junior for the job, I was sent as a second in command of the Consulate General in Barcelona, to take care of the very interesting study, and that's how I wound up there. But here's where history takes peculiar turns. The analysis of the industry of Barcelona was duck soup. I had seen textile mills in Cuba and elsewhere and there was no problem with the job. Analysis of Spain's dry fruit's trade was also no problem. So it wasn't long before, frankly, I was beginning to be bored, and began to cast around for something useful to do. And my Consul General who was about 15 years my senior

Q: Senior...

CORTADA: Senior, 15 years my senior, a gentleman, a China hand and a diplomat of the old school, also extremely capable, with a wonderful wife, he gave me a free hand. I found out that Spain's pre-Spanish civil war economists were all Catalans. Furthermore, they were all Republicans. And those who were not in exile, but remained in Barcelona, had their wings severely clipped, were under surveillance by Franco's agents and had no contact with their colleagues in other countries. Since about 1936 until I turned up in the place, these folk really knew very little of what was going on in the world and nothing about the Marshall plan. Now, I am a pack rat by nature, and had saved all of my study papers from the Brookings Institute courses including details about the Marshall plans which included an analysis for each one of the countries benefiting from it. And these papers had an explanation of the philosophy behind them. What I did was establish a connection with these key economists, all of whom were much older than I, invite them to my home, about six or seven of them, key figures, have a scotch, and discuss the economy of Europe. Of course, they were fascinated. In a about a year, they learned all that was to be learned about the Marshall Plan. When in 1951, and I was already gone, the United States concluded an economic agreement with Spain, who were the people to implement it in the Spanish government. Well, folks of mine, all of whom had learned about the Marshall Plan in my living room! Each one of them went to a key position and they are the ones who developed that magnificent program for Spain which has turned that country into what it is today.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Spanish officials at that time. Were they mostly phalange types? Were the competent, I mean the officials you dealt with...?

CORTADA: Oh, yes. They were all Phalangistas, otherwise they couldn't hold the job, whether they were in the military, or whether they were in the civilian government. Very, very capable, that's why they won that civil war. The military were professionals. Just don't forget that Franco at the age of thirty-three was the youngest Major General in Europe and a veteran of the RIF wars in North Africa. So these were very capable people and it was not so long after the war. These people were still all gung-ho. And those officials in the civil government, like the civil governor of Barcelona, were former army officers.

Q: Well. How did they react towards American representatives?

CORTADA: Well, they were extremely friendly, but annoyed with our doghouse policy, instead of recognizing Spain's anti-communist posture, how they stayed out of WWII. But in my particular case and in my wife's, it was a completely different situation when they found out that I was as fluent in Spanish as they were, and not only that, but also in Spanish poetry. I still can recite, at my age, some of the key poems from the Middle Ages. In social gatherings that we would have, where still these things were done, the guests would come in with a particular poem and bingo I would contribute a stanza. Well, the Catalans, (and my wife is also bilingual so the Spanish ladies felt very comfortable with her) came to regard me with my Catalan surname, a Spaniard, who somehow or another for several generations had been somewhere else, but understood Spain's culture clearly. This led to some very frank and fruitful discussions. For example, there was a Baptist missionary, John David Hughey, in Barcelona proselytizing. He had been proselytizing in Yugoslavia and got kicked out. You will recall that Truman, a Baptist, had said that he'd see Franco in hell first before he recognized him because of his persecution of the Baptists. Well actually, it wasn't so much persecution as the closed circle that Spain had put around itself. Now, John David Hughey and I became good friends, and I attended a number of church sessions. I went to see the Civil Governor about the matter. "Why the hell do you have those Civil Guards around the Baptist Meeting House, when these people are harmless as can be." "That isn't the problem", he responded, "If he (Hughey) has his meetings in Barcelona proper, I don't care, he can have them all day long, but he insists upon going to some of the villages outside, where Roman Catholicism is so intense and the priests so fanatic that they feel that the devil has come in their midst. They could do harm to them and create embarrassing situations for us. So I got my Civil Guards there, not to harass John David Hughey but to protect him from being harmed by the villagers." He said: "If you will tell John David to stay out of those villages, there won't be any problems, as a matter of fact I won't even have any of plain clothesmen around his church." Well, be that as it may, the fact was that John Davis was not pestered any more when he was in Barcelona. With regard to the Baptist issue there came a group of Congressmen with blood in their eyes. They were mostly very pro-Franco. They were escorted by a Spanish paid lobbyist by the name of Patrick.

Q: They were pro-Franco, or anti-Franco?

CORTADA: No, they were pro-Franco, and they wanted to force Truman to normalize relationships. You see, we're talking about 1950.

Q: This was very much, I mean, you had particularly the catholic church of the United States pushing for it, which meant that you had the Irish and the Italian population pushing for it.

Q: So, you left Barcelona in 1951, and then I have a hiatus, a pause till 1953.

CORTADA: Well, it's in my bio. While I was in Barcelona, I became very interested in the proposition..."did Europe begin in the Pyrenees" like Victor Hugo indicated, particularly since the folks in the Department had been brought up in the British-French tradition, and viewed Spain as something like an extension of Africa. I took issue with that and began to dig into the history of Catalonian Spain. I realized how wrong these folks were who had been under the influence of the French and British romanticists. And I became so interested in it that when the Department asked for volunteers for exotic languages, I put in my application for Arabic dimly received. Somebody had the idea that when you were past 24, you couldn't learn another language and I was now in my mid '30s. Also because I was already bilingual and an economist destined to go back to Latin America. But I pointed out that there wasn't a single Arabic speaking officer in the Foreign Service who was also an economist. So they allowed me to go to Arabic language and area specialization.

Q: Did you take it in Washington?

CORTADA: In Washington. I took it in Washington and when the experiment was done, there were only five of us in the class. The institute opened up an office in Lebanon, in Beirut, and sent these boys over there. And I went to Basra. You see, what happened at the end of another six months of this kind of immersion, the way it worked out, was that my oral knowledge of the language was superior to that of the boys who had stayed in Lebanon, but their knowledge of classical Arabic was better than mine.

Q: You served in Basra then as a Consul from 53 to 55. Were you running the Consulate then?

CORTADA: Yes.

Q: What was the situation in Iraq in the 53 to 55 period?

CORTADA: Very stable. I caught the end of the British Raj because while I was there the British military left and the Iraqi army command achieved total independence. The only British influence remaining in the place was the Port Engineer...and of course the Basra Petroleum Company. We had a Consulate there because there were about fifty American oil workers in those fields. The Basra Petroleum Company was owned in equal shares by the British, the French, the Dutch, and ourselves with Gulbenkian having a five percent interest in it.

Q: How did you find the Iraqi officials?

Q: What about your relations with the Embassy. Ambassador Goldman was the Ambassador...?

CORTADA: Well, he was there. At the beginning, there was another fellow...what was his name? He was later on, I believe, Ambassador to Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria. He was a bachelor. He was followed by Goldman. Relations with the Embassy were excellent under both gentlemen.

Q: You didn't have much dealing with the Embassy?

CORTADA: No, but whatever dealings there were, whatever the Embassy wanted, I complied with immediately. I never had to ask the Embassy for anything. I never had any problem with the Embassy.

Q: Who was Sheik of Kuwait at that time?

CORTADA: Kuwait at that time was looked upon as a British enclave. And frankly, the Iraqis never would have made a move on Kuwait if the British had not departed from the area. But once they left that was it. You see what happened was that in the Turkish period, Mesopotamia was divided into three Wilayats: Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. The Basra Wilayat, governed by a Turkish Wali consisted of four districts: Amara, Basra, Montefik and Kuwait. It included Arabic speaking areas in Southern Arabistan and (now part of Iran renamed Khuzestan). Kuwait consisted then only of a small hamlet with pearl diving and ship construction as mainstay. There was a long history of association of southern Iraq with Kuwait and the present Iranian side of the Shatt Al-Arab River. Incidentally, Shatt means river. That was the basis for Saddam Hussein's attempt to take advantage of Iran's troubles.

Q: This is in 1990?

CORTADA: Earlier than that. Remember they had a long eight years' war with Iran. The Turkish past was the cause of it. He wanted to seize Arabistan and Kuwait, and reconstruct what was at one time the Basra Wilayat. And I can tell you this, whether Saddam Hussein is the dictator of Iraq, or a most mild mannered General a successor, this aspiration of Iraqis for Arabistan and Kuwait will never go away.

Q: Well, you left, and as you say, it was a relatively tranquil period, I mean, things were going to go to hell later on. In fact, things really went bad. Your next tour was in Cairo?

CORTADA: Cairo.

Q: Cairo, where you served from 1955 to 1959, which was...There were a number of things happening then?

CORTADA: Very much so, and I played one or two important roles in that period.

Q: Would you tell what you were doing in Cairo and then...?

CORTADA: Well, I was assigned to Cairo. Curiously enough, Chuck Manning who was at that time the Deputy Director for Administration for NEA wrote me a letter toward the end of my assignment in Basra in which he said: "Look, we've got three posts open, and given the fact that you've done so well in Basra, we'd like to give you a choice. Head of the Political Section in Damascus; number two in the Consulate General in Algeria or Tunisia, I don't remember which one. And the number two spot in the Economic Section in the Embassy in Cairo." I wrote back, stating that I was extremely grateful for these options. While I realized that the spot of major prestige, and I suppose for advancement, would be head of the Political Section in Damascus, my French was lousy. I was not a political scientist nor an experienced political officer. I would have had no business taking that job. The number two spot in the Consulate General would be duck soup. But the Consul General, Murray Hughes, held that job when I was in Havana and I would not serve under him under any circumstances. I'd be delighted to go to Cairo where I could continue with my Arabic, economic work which I was very fond of, furthermore, the Economic Councilor, Bob Carr, had a Ph.D. in economics and I would enjoy working under someone with that kind of a background. So I wound up in Cairo.

Q: What was the political and economic situation when you arrived in Egypt in 1955?

CORTADA: Gamal Abdul Nasser was in his heyday. Rampant nationalism, very anti-British, very anti-French, hell bent on a united Arab world to wipe out Israel. He hadn't quite gotten to bed with the Russians yet. That happened while I was there. He tried very hard to get the United States to do his financing. What he really wanted was to get the Russians to finance capital projects like the High Aswan Dam and obtain from the United States, British, and French, the financing of light industry. He believed this would put Egypt in an economic condition which would enable it to support a good military machine which could go after the Israelis. This is what he was really dreaming about, and it was during that period that I landed in Cairo. I had developed a technique when new to a post no different than when I was in business. I would visit immediately the people with whom I would be dealing. In my first week, I called on the Exchange Control Director, business managers, bank directors. By the time two weeks had gone by, I had just about set up my clientele, so to speak. My job was to prepare periodic foreign trade and general economic analysis. Those were my basic responsibilities. I was also Commercial Attaché and helped promote American business.

Q: The Ambassador at the time was Byroade and then later it was Hare? How about Byroade?

CORTADA: For me a disgusting appointment. He began with an assignment in Europe, I mean in Washington, after the war. He was a West Pointer, an intelligent fellow, but that fellow's affinity for alcohol and presumably for skirts was unacceptable to me. Professionally, he didn't get anywhere with Nasser.

Q: I ran into somebody in the Philippines who did everything as his DCM, and just left, he couldn't take it.

CORTADA: Well, in Afghanistan, I heard that he wound up marrying one of his officer's wife, etc... Yet, his wife Mary was a great lady, General Marshall's niece. She was a wonderful woman. Byroade, as far as I was concerned, should never have been assigned anywhere.

Q: Did this have any effect on the Embassy?

CORTADA: Oh certainly it did. We all had his number. It was during Byroade's stay that Nasser made his famous speech nationalizing the Canal. Peter Chase and I were the two Arabists in the Embassy and we covered that speech. We prepared the telegram subject to clearance by Pete Hart who was the DCM, which reported the contents of that speech. Two or three days prior to that, we all knew in the Embassy that something was going to happen, something major. Now, the reason why Byroade had been sent to Cairo was the assumption that as a young military man, Nasser, also a young officer, that they would hit it off. But people forget that takes more than just a similarity of background and Byroade failed to exert any influence on him.

Q: We tried that with James Gavin in France with De Gaulle and it didn't work.

CORTADA: It didn't work. The result was that nothing constructive came out of that. But, two or three days before this was to happen, and Byroade knew that something was going to happen, damn it if he doesn't take off to the Red Sea on board a cabin cruiser to go fishing, instead of staying on the spot and monitoring the coming event. He should have made every effort to see what Nasser was up to and try to talk him out of it. We were so desperate that we got one of the Attachés to fly one of our officers to Byroade and persuade him to return. The effort failed and he remained on the yacht. Well, Byroade was mad at Dulles for some reason or another, and moped. He simply did not come back and face up to his responsibilities, and damn it if they didn't send him eventually as Ambassador to South Africa. He should have been thrown out of the service for lack of attention to a crucial phenomenon.

Q: He served as Ambassador to the Philippines, Afghanistan, all...

CORTADA: I simply do not understand where the pull came from because everybody knew that he was incompetent, with very objectionable behavior. However, he was a good writer and could usually exert considerable charm when in the mood.

Q: What was the feeling in the Embassy towards the nationalization?

CORTADA: Well, we felt that the French probably were not thoroughly justified in believing that the Egyptians could not run the Canal. It seemed to us that they could run it, but the issue was a political one.

Q: Very quickly, the concentration, at least to the public eyes, was that the Egyptian pilots couldn't work. I mean this was the sort of a western thing that was put out, and when that proved to be wrong, it wiped out that whole argument.

CORTADA: Well, this is why Peter Chase and I had the feeling that the Egyptians could run it, and the other officers in the Embassy didn't discuss it very much. It was sort of a mute question with a *fait accompli*, a kind of wait and see thing. And we were right with respect to the Egyptians' ability to operate the Canal.

Q: What happened, were the French and British Embassies in your contacts there, were they trying to work on us? I mean, what was the relationship?

CORTADA: Insofar as what was going on at the ambassadorial level, I don't know, but below that, there was practically none.

Q: How did we view the Soviets in all that time?

CORTADA: Well, our policy, not only in Egypt, but throughout the entire Middle East was dictated almost exclusively by Cold War considerations. It was Cold War considerations that overshadowed everything. There was no question about that.

Q: What was our concern?

CORTADA: Well, our concern was that Russia might persuade the Islamic nations, (a) to become communist, (b) to join forces militarily with the Soviet Union in preparation for a clash which the Soviet saw might occur one day with the West. This was a policy of trying to gain allies, and friends, and we were caught up in that game.

Q: Well now, when you got there in 1955, who was where as far as the West and the Soviets...

CORTADA: The Soviets had been probing to see how they could get a foothold in Egypt. But Nasser was not particularly anxious to get into bed with them, because he knew what they could be like. He was not about to change from a British master to a Russian master. He was well aware that our posture was one of trying to encourage the Egyptians to keep out of the Russian clutch. As happens so often in the history of our nation, the American Congress with its continuous habit of procrastination and looking at matters strictly through short term domestic blinkers made it not only possible, but almost inevitable that the Egyptians wound up almost in a closed economic clasp with the Soviets. The Department of State tried to get the American Congress to settle the question of cotton price supports promptly, so that the world market would know what to be held to, since American price supports influenced what ultimately world prices would be. The Egyptians produced Pima cotton, among the finest quality cotton in the world, although we have Pima grown in Arizona which is just as good, but not as much. Cotton was Egypt's most important foreign exchange source. Congress continued to procrastinate and Egypt was unable to sell its cotton on the world market at its maximum price. Egypt wound up, I think it was the end of 1956, I don't recall whether it was 1956 or 55, I think it was 56, with its cotton unsold. The Russians working through Czechoslovakia made a deal of cotton for arms. The Russians would then sell it for hard currency in Western Europe. They made a big deal out of that. But the Egyptians wound up with a tremendous amount of arms which Byroade once described to Nasser as not obsolete but obsolescent. And he was right there. So that's how Egypt wound up with a hell of a big army and an awful lot of arms.

Q: Did the Aswan Dam come after the Suez crisis, or...

CORTADA: No. The High Aswan Dam issue came before the Suez crisis.

Q: Were you there at the time?

CORTADA: Yes, I was.

Q: What was our prognostication from the economic point of view in all of this?

CORTADA: Well, the position that we took...I arrived in Cairo when the High Aswan Dam studies were being made...The position we took was serious reservations about its economic viability. Now, purely as a political measure, the United States, France, and England together persuaded the World Bank to make an offer to finance a beginning stage of the High Aswan Dam. But Nasser was a very devious guy and I seem to recall seeing something to the effect that when he visited Yugoslavia to see Tito, sometime around that period, that he told Tito he was going to nationalize the Canal. The breakdown of the High Aswan Dam negotiations merely gave him the excuse to take that step, and how it happened was Dulles' own fault.

Q: One gets the feeling that there was more than just normal antipathy. I mean, there was real antipathy between Dulles and...

CORTADA: Dulles, for my money, was one of the more disastrous Secretaries of State we've had. Furthermore, the man never even wrote memoranda of any kind. Nobody knew what he was going to do. He despised peoples who were not of European origin. If he received any Latin American Ambassador, he would look upon them like a British Raj receiving some poor Indian Maharajah. And furthermore, he knew mostly European history. And within European history, take him out of British and Germanic affairs, and he didn't see to much else. I didn't think very much of the man although fortunately, I never had a damned thing to do with him.

Q: Well, did any of this dislike of Dulles for Nasser trickle down to the Embassy? Did you figure it out?

CORTADA: No, not at all. Whatever Dulles felt, nobody gave a damn about. Everybody knew about Dulles' antipathy, but it didn't rub off on anyone. Nor were we innocent of Nasser's devious nature. He wasn't kidding anybody. I found the culture interesting but by no means enchanting.

Q: Why was that?

CORTADA: Because of the abuse of women, the brutality with which animals were dealt with, the way kids were smacked around in order to discipline them, the lack of sticking to your word when you make it, deviousness. It's a cruel civilization, and I didn't find that admirable.

Q: Were you there when the Aswan Dam was turned down? Was that when Nasser said: "You can drink the waters of the Red Sea"?

CORTADA: Yes, but this is not the way the thing worked out.

Q: Could you explain how...?

Q: In one of my interviews with Julius Walker who was then a very junior Public Affairs Officer, he had to go into Dulles' office just after he had told the Egyptian Ambassador and he said: "Honest to God, Dulles was dancing a jig of joy." I mean he really enjoyed doing that.

CORTADA: Yes, and he proceeded to screw up the whole Middle East as a result.

Q: Did matters change for our Embassy and for you and all, after the turn down of the Aswan Dam as far as our relations were concerned?

CORTADA: Not in terms of our personal relationships. No. The lines of communications between us and key officers in the Egyptian government were maintained all along and were very friendly, in a comfortable fashion. There was no problem there at all, because within that devious type of atmosphere, there were about a half a dozen of key Egyptian officials just as honorable as anyone one could find anywhere. They were straight shooters, competent, good patriots, etc...In fact, to cite an instance, there was a question as to what a Cuban delegation was doing in Cairo, its connection if any with an arms for cotton deal, and who was going to do it. The Egyptian Central Bank published a periodic report which included foreign trade by country including those with the Iron Curtain countries. By reworking all those figures over and over again, I found out it was Czechoslovakia. But the go-between in Cairo was Poland, and I'll tell you how that came about. The integrity of the Egyptian bank and foreign exchange officials was reflected in the equal integrity of the data published. Che Guevara had turned up in Cairo.

Q: He was Cuban...?

CORTADA: He was Castro's right hand man. An Argentinean Revolutionary who had joined Castro early in the movement and who persuaded him to definitively go the communist route and seek Soviet help.

Q: Castro's...?

CORTADA: We still had diplomatic relations with Cuba and the Cuban Chargé d' Affaires in Cairo was a very good friend of mine. I wanted to get an idea of what made Guevara tick. Through the Cuban Chargé d' Affaires, it was arranged for Che Guevara and his bewhiskered gentlemen to come to our house for a genuine Cuban dinner which my wife Shirley prepared. I also invited the wife of our DCM, Tony Ross, who spoke Spanish and two or three other members of the Embassy who also had this capability. Mrs. Ross and another lady joined me and Guevara for a lengthy after dinner chat. And Guevara was very candid. He told me exactly what they were going to do in Cuba. Of course, I reported this conversation to the Department and our Ambassador in Havana.

The interesting point is that Che Guevara, grateful for getting a real Cuban dinner in a foreign place like Cairo, sent me a box of Upmann #4 cigars, Petit Cetros. When I was in Havana, I used to buy for ten cents a piece the seconds of these cigars. Seconds meant only that there was a spot on them but didn't alter the smoking quality. Upmann's Petit Cetros #4 have a special aroma which an experienced smoker can detect a mile away. Well, later Che Guevara gave a party for people who had been nice to him and his group. Shirley and I were invited. I looked around, talked to everybody like one does at a cocktail party. All of a sudden I caught a whiff of an Upmann #4 Petit Cetro. Where did it come from? I thought it was from one of the Cubans, but no, there wasn't a Cuban in sight. It was from the Polish Ambassador. So, I went up to him to say hello, and one thing and another...I wasn't smoking at all. Quite boldly without any basis for the remark other than the odor, I commented, "Mr. Ambassador, I understand you had a very satisfactory meeting with Che Guevara." I didn't know anything of the sort, it was a canard on my part. He turned red as a beet and I knew what had happened. I had hit it on the nail. So we got the picture put together.

Q: Well, how did the nationalization of the Canal and the eventual Suez crisis with Britain, Israel, and France attacking Egypt, how did that play out in our Embassy?

CORTADA: Well, there again, the relationships with the Egyptians went on unimpaired. Even when it appeared that we might be going to war. Nasser had arrived at the conclusion, once the attack had begun, that we were going to support the British, the French, the Israelis. He thought it was curtains. And I understand he so told our Ambassador. He was astonished when Eisenhower called the dogs off. But, right up to that very moment, Nasser cooperated with us, with the evacuation not only of our citizens, but of other nationalities. We evacuated 1600 people. Since I was one of the very few officers with consular experience, I dealt with the evacuation. The relationship was very workable.

Q: The Ambassador was still Byroade?

CORTADA: Oh no, he had gone. They got rid of Byroade after the fiasco of the Canal, and Ray Hare came in to pick up the pieces. Let me say, Ray Hare is probably the most talented, finest American diplomat I have ever met. A gentleman, brilliant, even tempered, astute, a scholar, my admiration for Hare is tremendous, and for his wife, Julie, Oh, what a lady! He would have staff meetings at which he would give us a bit of philosophy from time to time. He had gone to the Sorbonne for Arabic training in his youth and had been to Turkey before he went into the Foreign Service. He had been exposed to broad thinking about the whole area in the 1920's. He always kept his head. During that crisis, he never lost his cool, maintained connections with Nasser right along, in fact, we had one interesting incident at the evacuation dock. I had gone to the pier about six o'clock in the morning to get ready for the people who would be arriving and who I would certify to the marines who had a launch to take them to the troopship. All of a sudden a taxi came barreling down to the docks, and a tall man with a suitcase sprinting just as fast as he could ran to the dock gate which was still open. He said: "Mr. Consul, I'm British, and I want to see if I can get out of here. Can you get me onto the ship." I said: "Of course." I put him in the launch and sent him on board the ship. Fifteen minutes later, the Egyptian military came. They wanted to retrieve him. I remarked: "You people don't know anything about American history, do you?" "No." "You've never heard of the War of 1812. We went to war with Britain, when we were just a small nation because British ships used to take people off American ships. There'll be no taking anybody off any American ship." Well, they began to threaten: "We're not going to let anybody evacuate..." "You can do what you like." I notified the Ambassador of what I had done and he got hold of Nasser. Nasser understood and that was the end of that incident.

Q: How about the aftermath, what happened up through really from 1956 to 1959?

CORTADA: Alright. Here's where I... and I say... the thing that I find awkward about interviews of this sort is that I have to go into an I, I, I did, kind of thing.

Q: That is of course what Oral History is.

CORTADA: I'm not doing it to brag about a role, but because it is the way it happened and the record is there for anyone to look at. When the crisis was over our families came back. We went through around 6 months when there wasn't a ripple on the lake, everything low key, no visitors to speak of. One went about writing periodic reports and that kind of thing. One day, during that period, that lull, ...we used to live in a place called Maadi. Maadi was on the outskirts of Cairo, and quite a number of Americans and foreigners lived there, as well as well-to-do Egyptians. Going home for lunch with the Military Attaché^{1/2}, Colonel Pope, and two other colleagues, whom I don't recall, they were going in my car, I commented out loud: "I think the time has come to send PL 480 wheat to Egypt and begin to rebuild relationships." Which were at an official low point. In the meantime, the Egyptians were dickering with the Russians about the High Aswan Dam. The Russians had a lot of influence because of all those arms sales, and the potential High Aswan Dam project. Pope said: "You're nuts, you'll never get Dulles to go along with the idea. His detestation of Nasser is such that he'll never go along with this." I said: "I'm not so sure." So I went home and had lunch. By his time, Bob Carr, my boss, had been transferred and replaced by another delightful and highly competent gentleman, the late Ross Whitman. Ross Whitman was also a Ph.D. in economics and one of the first econometricians in the nation. When I was a very young man working as a salesman in Gimbel's, Ross Whitman was R.H. Macy's top economist. Ross Whitman was about ten, fifteen years my senior. Very competent and a fine professional economist. After returning from lunch I went over to Ross and explained my PL 480 idea. Ross' reaction was the same as Colonel Pope's. But I persisted and he agreed to try an approach to the department if Hare approved. I wrote a telegram which said in effect very bluntly "Request consider selling 500,000 tons of wheat under PL 480." Ross looked at that telegram and commented that the Ambassador would never let this thing go through, it was too blunt, "you've got to condition this message, you've got to soften it up somehow." "You mean Viennese music in the background for seduction." "But you're agreeable to let something go." He nodded and I suggested he try his hand at it. Which he did. He took the bite out of it. When he saw the Ambassador for clearance, Hare concurred but felt it was an awful telegram. He told Ross to say just what you want. Hare then drafted the telegram more or less as I had done and off went the telegram to Washington. Within 24 hours, the answer came back with concurrence! "Offer 500,000 tons of wheat, so many thousand pounds of sorghum, so much of this, so much of that, for soft currency." I was then authorized by Ross and Hare to sit down with my good friend in the Egyptian government who was the key person to negotiate with and obtain his government's agreement. Hamed Al-Sayeh was married to a Finn and our wives got along well. When the proforma contracts came, we got together in his house for a meal including the two ladies. We were there until 4 o'clock in the morning negotiating. I bought nickel cigars in the Embassy store, brought a bottle of Scotch which Hamed and I placed on the floor together with a backgammon set. Here on the floor drinking this stuff, smoking all these cigars, and playing tric-trac we settled the draft contract including a clearance by the Minister of Finance and Nasser himself. About two o'clock in the morning, we came around to sorghum. I did not know specifically what sorghum was, neither did he. The dictionary wasn't very clear. We called the Agricultural Attaché^{1/2} at that hour of the morning, but he was out of the country. So I turned around and said: "Look Hamed, sorghum is a food, obviously from the dictionary definition, so either humans eat it or animals eat it. And you got humans, and you got animals, so what the hell is the difference. So, okay." We had another problem, rate of exchange would govern payments fifteen years hence. Again I said: "Hamed, what is the difference. Fifteen years from now who the devil knows who's going to be around or what the conditions of the world are going to be, or what currency relationships will prevail. The issue is academic. This is repayable in Egyptian currency. So you're either going to print more money or you'll pay with what you have. So what's the difference, forget it." He accepted the argument. Next morning, I went to the Embassy, and believe me, I was like something the dog dragged in. I pointed out to my boss and the Ambassador that the negotiation was finished and ready to go. That, my dear friend, is the way Egyptian-American relationships began the long way back, culminating ultimately into what it is today.

Q: Fascinating.

CORTADA: This is the way the thing was done, exactly like that.

Q: Well, talking about another relationship, you're an Arabist. You were in Egypt how did you view, and how did, you might say, those others who were involved in the Arab world, view Israel at that time?

Q: I'd like to, speaking of time, to move on, you left Egypt in 1959?

CORTADA: That's correct, and I went to the Senior Seminar on Foreign policy.

Q: Yes and then you came out of the Senior Seminar. The Senior Seminar is the equivalent to the National War College. Yes. You came out of that, and you went to the Near East and Asian and South East Asian...

CORTADA: No. I was assigned to NEA as Economic Advisor for Greek, Turkish and Iranian Affairs. A key economic problem in that particular office at that time was the Greek debt which went all the way back to 1825. There was no way that Greece could get into the European Economic Community until some arrangements had been made about that issue. The Dutch who held a part of that debt weren't about to let them in unless some mutually satisfactory arrangement was made of the debt question. I got into this issue. What had been originally a relatively modest debt, had 135 years later become enormous. So, it was a question of negotiating that down to a reasonable figure. Once I had finished studying the issue, and made my recommendations I didn't see anything else to be done in that office. I recommended my job be abolished. I was offered one of two alternatives. One, because of what I had done in connection with the White Paper on Cuba, the Latin American Bureau offered me the job of Director for the whole west coast of South America. Chile, Ecuador, Peru, etc...and the NEA Bureau, Pete Hart was then the Assistant Secretary, Pete Hart pointed out that the job of Director of the Office of Near East and South Asian Regional Affairs (NR) had become vacant. The Deputy Director was Guy Hope. Guy was my same age, my same class, there was \$100 difference in our salaries. I made \$100 more. I liked Guy a lot and suggested he be promoted Director, and I his Deputy. I had been trained as an Arabist. I had never served in any of the western Latin American countries. Just because I know the language and literature, and general Hispanic culture and history did not qualify me in my opinion to deal with the heavily Indic Andean cultures. I accepted the job of Deputy Director of NR in NEA.

Q: What were your main responsibilities?

CORTADA: Helping cut up a billion dollar pie, military and economic pie.

Q: Where was it going?

CORTADA: Well, we had economic aid coordination responsibilities all the way from Greece to East Pakistan. And part of my job was to represent the Bureau where we all sat around trying to cut that thing up somehow.

Q: How did we feel about military aid to these countries?

CORTADA: I wouldn't have given them a popgun. All they were going to do was slaughter each other. For us...the justification was cold war policy and a help to our balance of payments. But as a moral issue it was a bummer.

Q: But how do we feel about it at the time though?

CORTADA: At the time? Oh no, at the time, it was very important, because it was a means of tying them to our military, by having the same kind of military equipment. Don't forget, our policies were Cold War oriented. So, if we didn't do it, the Soviets would get in. So therefore we would get in to keep the Soviets out.

Q: What did we see...what was the supposition...what was the Soviet threat in the Near East?

CORTADA: Well, the Soviet threat in the Middle East was that if it could get the military alliance of all those Arab countries, destroy the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, and control the oil resources, it then had Europe at its mercy. Europe and Japan with the exception of England, depend upon oil that's located in the Islamic countries. France with Algeria, Spain and Algeria, so therefore our policy was to parry that.

Q: When you were in NEA, from 61 to 63, the Kennedy administration had just come on board. What was the impact of this change from the Eisenhower republican administration to the Kennedy democratic administration, as you saw it in NEA.

CORTADA: Well, let me point out that a few months after I was Deputy Director of NEA, the Director was transferred to an African country and I became Director. So, I was Director most of the time. Since I moved into the job, after the Senior Seminar, not long before the change over, I really had very little exposure to what things were like in the Eisenhower administration. When the new Administration came in, I was still feeling my way on what the role of NEA should be. So that I have no standard of comparison.

Q: But I mean, there wasn't a feeling of a whole bunch of new guys coming in running all over the place, as happened in some administrations and sometimes...

CORTADA: Oh no, the office came in with Phillips Talbot, who was the Assistant Secretary. It concerned me a little bit, because his experience in the outside world, he was a political appointee, in the outside world was limited to India, and we had so many Arab countries. But he was very pleasant gentleman. It was a smooth takeover. I don't recall any unpleasantness at all. The only aspect of it that I got into very quickly was that my boss was still the Director when this happened, but he was assigned to the United Nations most of the time, so I had to deal with the CENTO issue. We were a defacto member of a military planning alliance (Central Treaty Organization) rather not an actual member but a participant in a planning military alliance that involved Turkey, Iraq, Iran support for the northern tier defense concept. India didn't like it. Since Dean Rusk was very pro-India, as were Phillips Talbot and Chester Bowles then Under Secretary of State, they didn't want any part of it. The first thing they wanted to do was disintegrate this alliance. I spent one entire night drafting a memorandum to sway them from this action, pointing out what was going to happen if they did, that they would be giving the Soviets a very cheap victory for nothing. The key in my opinion to all of this was to try to get these countries to coordinate economically with the military aspect secondary. So you'd have something to tie these people together in an interest to keep a northern tier defense concept somehow. I spent all night redrafting, redrafting, till I had everything down to about just a page and a half. I took the paper to Talbot the next morning. He didn't like it worth a damn, because he wanted to disintegrate the alliance but how could he in the light of what I pointed out. He told me: "Well, I'll take it up to Chester Bowles." He didn't like it either, but what could he do given the alternative. Dean Rusk didn't like it either. I understood the President didn't like it either, but the wisdom won out of not handing the Russians a silver platter with caviar. Also, Dean Rusk had said publicly that he wasn't about to travel anywhere, but he was on an airplane one month later going to a meeting of the treaty organization that he wanted to disintegrate.

Q: So, we come rally to 1963 where you got a very interesting assignment. How did this come about?

CORTADA: Stuart, I'm still somewhat mystified about some of the ins and outs of that damned thing, one of the weirdest experiences that I have ever been in, and looking back I'm still puzzled. The revolt had broken out in Yemen. The Imam had been kicked out but the northern tribes were supporting the Imam, while the southern tribes were backed by Egypt and 50,000 Egyptian troops. Civil war between North and South raged. The Department of State came to the point of recognizing the Yemeni Republic as the government, despite a lot of British and Saudi Arabian pressures to the contrary, but they did. And the Yemenis appointed the same Ambassador to the United Nations and Washington. To the best of my knowledge, from the little I was able to gather, and I must admit I didn't probe very much either, the United States was puzzled as to what to do because of the presence of the 50,000 Egyptian troops in the place and the fact that for all practical purposes, Yemen had become almost an Egyptian, if not colony, a zone of influence with a civil war going on. There was a man in the White House, on the National Security Council, Robert Komer, who from the best of my knowledge had never worked in the Arab world but apparently had a great deal of influence in the Yemen question. President Kennedy is said to refer to the Yemen conflict as "Komer's War". Years later, he was proposed for Turkey as Ambassador, and I think the Turks objected.

Q: He went to Turkey as Ambassador for a while.

CORTADA: I thought he had been refused.

Q: No, I think he went there for a while, but maybe I am wrong.

CORTADA: I think he got refused. But whatever it was, it was not a particularly fruitful thing. In one of these books about the Kennedy administration, President Kennedy is quoted as referring to Komer's war with respect to Yemen. But the man didn't know beans about the place. I never met him. Take a look at the picture, at the moment when the question came up. Phil Talbot, no direct experience in the Arab world, Howard Cottam, the senior Deputy Assistant, splendid gentleman, very talented, Ph.D. in agriculture, experience in Brazil, never had put foot in the Arab world. The other Deputy Assistant Secretary, Jim Grant was a lawyer, out of AID, had never dealt directly with the Arab world, the Director of the Office of Near East Affairs which included Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, etcetera. Bob Strong had served in Syria for a relatively short time when our Embassy in Syria was closed down and he went out together with the whole staff. Hence, his experience in the area was almost negligible. This was the set up in Washington. Fortunately we were very strong overseas with all our embassies headed by top flight ambassadors. But there was not a clear understanding in the Department at top level of what all the basic issues were in connection with Yemen. Somebody had come up with the proposal of sending to Yemen a gentleman who has since passed away and whose name I don't remember. It was Charles something or other, very active in DACOR. He died last year. Well, he was offered the Ambassadorship to Yemen. He had never been in an Arab country, spoke no Arabic and Yemen is a place where if you don't speak Arabic, forget it. He very wisely turned down the proffered honor. For some reason that escapes me, Bob Strong wanted Bob Stookey who was Chargé ½ - you see the Ambassador to Saudi Arabia was also accredited as Minister to Yemen before we recognized the Arab Republic of Yemen, when that connection was severed. When Stookey was removed I came in as Chief of Mission in my own right. The question in my mind was why did Bob Strong want to get rid of Stookey. Bob belonged there. He negotiated the recognition of Yemen, and was one of the most competent classical Arabists in the Service. He and his wife had no children, thus he had no responsibilities in that sense. His wife was teaching Arab kids how to read English. Bob was a musician. He was also a painter. He had the confidence of the Arab officials in toto. Now, there were two projects the United States had going in Yemen. One was building a road that began nowhere and went nowhere. Well that's not quite true. It began on the Red Sea in Mocha and went all the way up to Saana. And there were the waterworks in Taiz, there not being a single Yemeni engineer in the whole place. The head of the road building project was a very cantankerous, elderly gentleman who I believed had retired for one of the States' Departments of Transportation. As an engineer, he was a crackerjack, but without a doubt one of the most insensitive persons I have ever met in dealing with peoples of another culture. He despised the Yemenis, and he treated them harshly. As a result, there was constant friction. The Yemenis retaliated by stealing from the AID road project. It was a nasty situation. And he was forever complaining that Stookey wouldn't do anything. Well, what they should have done was not remove Stookey. They should have taken that old codger and gotten him the hell out of there, as they eventually did, after I left. He didn't get funny with me because I was extremely firm with him when he tried it. Strong insisted upon Stookey's removal and Talbot went along with it. I came in one Monday morning after one weekend and the Deputy Assistant Secretary, Howard Cottam asked to see Phil Talbot immediately, that a question affecting my future had come up. Talbot with a sheepish attitude, and not more than five minutes told me to get ready to go to Yemen immediately as Chargé ½. That was it. No, not even like that, just get going. No explanation, what was the rationale, what was I supposed to be doing. It left me uneasy. I didn't like it. So I went to see Bob Strong. It was obvious after a 10 minute talk with Bob that he couldn't care any more about Yemen than flying to the moon. Furthermore, all he wanted was to get Bob Stookey out of there, have me work something out with that old cantankerous fellow, and get the damned road built. Beyond that, he couldn't care less, had no understanding at all of the relevance of that place once the British would leave, as indeed happened later. For me, the temptation was to tell them all to go to hell. I was on the promotion list already for class 1, and I just didn't like that kind of attitude, very cavalier. There was no justification, no rationale. But with a civil war going on if I did so, they might have said: "Jim is chicken." I decided therefore to accept the assignment, finish the road and waterworks. Given Talbot's lack of candor, I did something very unusual. I wrote a memorandum of instructions from him to me in connection with the assignment, what I was expected to do and that at the end of 18 months the assignment would be ended. And damn it if Talbot didn't initial it. Because we had a child in grade school, another one in high school and another in college, my wife, Shirley remained at our home in Orange for six months to get the kids lined up. Then she spent a year with me. And it turned out to be a very interesting assignment. And quite possibly prevented World War Three or at least 50,000 Egyptian and 50,000 British troops having a go at each other.

Q: You were showing me some letters of appreciation concerning an incident...

CORTADA: And the appreciation of the British Parliament in the matter. Notice that that congratulatory note from the Secretary of State Dean Rusk was sent to me from Rusk's office. Interestingly, I never heard from Talbot or any of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries, or the Director of NE about the plaudits including one from Rusk.

Q: Well, I think in the first place, could you explain what that situation was?

CORTADA: The situation was this. Sixteen British servicemen under a Colonel Blimp, who served as cooks, accountants, etc. in Aden where the British had 50,000 troops got their directions mixed up, because they had to go every year into a camping type of thing. And the Colonel Blimp instead of going south, went north.

Q: He is the eternal Colonel Blimp as a generic term for a doddering old guy, a military incompetent.

CORTADA: Absolutely. Because that's what happened. Instead of going south, he goes north...He might have been a major for all I know, but whatever it was, when you make a mistake of that kind, and you've been having fights with the Yemenis right along...So they wind up in the hands of one of the wildest of the Yemeni tribes. On the frontier between Aden and Yemen. I'm sitting at my breakfast table, with the BBC on, and lo and behold, I learn about the incident. Now, we had difficult communications capabilities with respect of the Department of State, so I knew I wasn't going to hear anything about this for a while. I began to take steps to find out what this was all about. I went to see the Yemeni military governor. He didn't know yet either because his communications were terrible. In the meantime, the British down in Aden through their contacts were trying to see if they could do something with the frontier tribes with no success. What happened was that the then tribal commander for that whole area was closely associated with the government in Sanaa. I found out that the sixteen prisoners were all coming to Taiz where I had my Embassy. Accordingly, I made arrangements for them to stay in an old palace and since bilharzia is an endemic disease they had a pool there full of it. I requested the American community to give me all their beer. We kept these soldiers in beer for a whole week, fed them, and had their clothes washed. In the meantime, the government of Yemen, whether prodded by the Egyptians or not, I don't know, tried to turn the incident into an American one, one that involved the United States. They wanted me to go to Sanaa to talk with the President and his Cabinet.

Q: What's the difference between Taiz and Sanaa?

CORTADA: Sanaa became the political capital of Yemen. Taiz was the capital during the Imam's period. And after the revolution, they moved to Sanaa.

Q: But you were in Taiz?

CORTADA: We were in Taiz because we still had the Embassy facilities there, and it wasn't easy getting the proper quarters, etc. in Sanaa. At the time, there was no need for it, really, because we had a very large AID encampment and supplies, all in Taiz. It didn't make any sense to move out of there until the road was finished.

Q: How far apart were Taiz and Saana?

Q: Well, with the situation, you said you went there, and you gave yourself your own instructions. How did the AID project go while you were there, plus Mr. Cantankerous, the engineer?

CORTADA: Smooth as silk, because once I got in the picture...You know, there's such a thing as physical appearance. This old man, big burly fellow had a bum leg, he always had a lot of pain in it, which I think contributed to his testiness. Bob Stookey was short, about 5 feet six, soft spoken, excellent war record. He was a tank officer during World War II in North Africa, a very fine man. But I think Bob's appearance affected the road engineer's attitude in part. Well, I'm not exactly a shrimp, and in my youth, I used to box. I was a wrestler. I was an oarsman. When that old man first tried to get a little funny with me, I said: "Hey, forget that I am head of this Embassy. I don't give a damn who the hell you are, where you come from, what you've done, you're not going to be abusive, that's all there is to it." Then a major crisis occurred. When for some reason or another, heaven knows what provoked it, but one night I was having a small dinner party at home, and the engineer came running to my house. He reported that "Somebody has just pumped a bunch of shots into the cabin of one of my workmen. You argue for good relations with the Arabs...and see what you get." I went to see what happened. Sure enough, there was a family there with a wife and baby and a bunch of bullet holes on the crib side. They had just gone right over the baby's crib. The bullets had also gone over the American worker while he was sitting and severed the top of his undershirt without hurting his skin. I gave an order to stop all construction immediately. Halt everything. Nothing opens tomorrow morning. In the morning, I had a long session with the military governor, after reporting to Washington, the Department came back and gave me a free hand to settle the problem any way I could. I wanted to stop any more threats of that kind, and furthermore I wanted to halt all the thievery which was going on. For thirty days, I kept the whole job closed down. Almost bankrupted the country because we were the biggest single source of cold cash in the place. The old engineer got over any more nonsense. As the weeks went by and I simply wouldn't give in he really became frightened and told me "You're going to get us all killed." I responded by saying: "Hey, you're the guy who says that we diplomats mollycoddle Arabs. I don't mollycoddle anybody, including you. We're not going back to work until such a time as they meet my demands. And if that takes forever, I don't mind playing golf every day." That took all the fight out of him anymore and there was no more nonsense. Well, eventually, they sent down the Vice President, a very able and sensible military man. I felt the time was right for settling the issue and agreed to start up the project. 2000 men went back to work. Robberies were stopped, the engineer quit being cantankerous and matters went smoothly. Just about 18 months were over, I was already within sight of the Sanaa plateau and final short lap. Meantime, the waterworks had been inaugurated. At a Chief of Mission's conference in Istanbul I reminded Talbot about my memorandum. A little later a couple of NEA inspectors swung through the area and came to Taiz. I was firm in holding NEA to the letter of the memorandum and left exactly eighteen months after my arrival. I had continued to feel uneasy about the NEA lack of interest in the Yemen scene. I had written a letter to the late Rodger Davies who got killed...

Q: In Cyprus, yes.

CORTADA: Rodger was an excellent Arabist, but he had a sick child and for many years he served in the United Nations I think, so he could be near appropriate facilities. But while I was in Yemen, he became Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for NEA. After one of my visits to Aden, I wrote Rodger that in my judgement, the British would be out of Aden entirely within five years. They had given Kenya independence, were now dependent upon the North Sea for oil, no longer on the Middle East. I didn't see them spending fifty million dollars a year keeping 50,000 troops in Aden. For what purpose? I believed the Department had better start thinking how they were going to make up for that absence because somebody was going to try to fill it. Rodger wrote back that I was mistaken. Stated he had been assured by the British Foreign Office that they would be there at least ten years. Well, they were out of there just a few years later. Left a vacuum. Iran tried to step into it. We've had the Gulf War. There shall be peace in that area only as long as we have troops in the place.

Q: Well, you left there in 1964. Right. Why did you get sent to UCLA? Was that at your behest? Was that your request?

CORTADA: No. No, I simply insisted on wanting out of Yemen as per my memorandum of assignment. I was indifferent with respect to my next assignment. I understood Talbot was annoyed with my posture. Three senior FSO's were sent to three different universities as senior fellows in a kind of diplomats for scholars swap. It was the first effort by the department in this respect. Incidentally UCLA published two papers I wrote while I was there. One dealt with the British-Yemen incident, the other concerned the theory of Central American unification. The latter was the seed for a book I wrote jointly with my son and published by Praeger in 1985. It dealt with Cuba, Central America and the Caribbean. Later on when I was in California, at UCLA, Talbot came out to address a World Conference group in Los Angeles. He asked me whether I would be willing to go back and I said no. With my California experience behind me, I was beginning to think seriously of early retirement. As I looked around there wasn't really any job at home or abroad in the foreign service that was catching my fancy. My ties here in Orange were tighter than ever. I was getting more and more interested in this community. Financially, I had no concern. Then I was offered the job of Dean of the School of Foreign Affairs in the Foreign Service Institute and I accepted. I created the School of Professional Studies and disintegrated the old School of Foreign Affairs. I broadened its scope to include political science studies and other fields. While I was there, one day, a friend who was the Administrative Officer for the European Division was taking German language studies, as he was going as Deputy Chief of Mission to Austria. We were in the elevator and I asked him if he wanted a ride back to the Department. While in the elevator he asked if I had kept up my economic skills. I said that I had kept up with the theory. "Why?" He explained that "We've got a serious problem in Italy. We need a Minister Councilor for Economic Affairs, will you take the job?" I responded negatively indicating that I had no intentions of going on anymore of these jobs. The fact was that I was thinking seriously of retirement in the not too distant future. When we were crossing the Roosevelt Bridge, he asked me if I was serious about retiring in a year or two? I said: "Yes, I'm thinking very seriously about it. As a matter of fact, I don't see any job at home or abroad that fascinates me. I'm getting more and more interested in my own country. In fact, there is only one post that I would really seriously consider. Barcelona for sentimental reasons, because in our youth my wife and I had a wonderful time there when we still had stars in our eyes." He said: "John Ford is the Consul General there and he has a lot of children, they're scattered all over, and he wants a curtailment of his assignment and back to the United States. If you want the job, it's yours. As you know, it's a Class 1 post, John is a Class 1 officer and that's a plush post." And that's how we wound up in Barcelona for three and a half years and they were magnificent. I also did a lot for my country.

Q: I'm looking for time here, and we'd probably better move on, but what were the main things that concerned you in Barcelona? This was from 67 to 70.

CORTADA: Well, it was very active. To begin with, we had the 6th Fleet or the 7th Fleet in the Mediterranean?

Q: It is the 6th Fleet.

CORTADA: The 6th Fleet. Well the 6th Fleet used to come to Barcelona regularly as a port of call. I had to make sure that everything was smooth. I worked out an official visit routine whereby unless a Rear Admiral was on board, we did not run all over the place. When I got there, there was practically an official visit every week. The calls were a nuisance for everybody. The Spanish officials were very pleased with the new arrangement. An interesting and touchy problem concerned the visit of a troop-ship with several thousand marines coming in directly from Vietnam. I saw a potential problem with shore leave and the poor quality of nightclubs. With the closest cooperation of the Spanish authorities, we assembled a fleet of buses the authorities turned over to us Montjuich Park, the place where the Olympics were recently held. The Marines were taken from point to point into the park where they saw a full program of entertainment and had some beer. Four or five hours later they got on the buses and back to the ships before they could get into trouble in the nightclubs. Those things were worked out very well. The Spanish educational system was going through a revolution. I had been a dean at the Foreign Service Institute, and a resident diplomat at UCLA quite recently with the rank of a senior professor at large, a circumstance known to Barcelona Academicians, friends from my first tour in Barcelona sixteen, seventeen years earlier. First thing I knew, I was part of a round table of professors, looking into changes in the University of Barcelona. Another situation concerned help in reorganizing the Graduate School of Business Administration of the Province of Barcelona for which I got a silver medal from the Spanish government. What I did was project an image in the area that American diplomats were not a bunch of ignorant asses. We were their equal academically and with kindred interests. Just because you are a diplomat doesn't mean you are just punching out visas. We had a constant flow of American entertainers and troops, opera stars. We all went out of our way to make sure that interrelationships with all social groups were broad and smooth. It was a super PR job. We managed to get one of those capsules that went to the moon. We had something like 150,000 visitors. It was a very major PR operation in the full sense of the word. Now, I was very fortunate in that Rich Brown was on the staff, then a very young officer, now he's Ambassador to Uruguay. Rich Brown had been in Vietnam as a Foreign Service Officer, and from there came to Barcelona. A very fine man. We had a very able group of officers. Majorca had become the focal point for hippies at that time. I had them all in my district and that required special handling. Once in a while one would wind up in jail because of drugs, but there were other situations. We had GIs whose parents were Spanish born. When they filled out tourist forms and entered Spain, the Spanish wanted to put them in the army. We worked out a solution whereby after arrest if that happened, the GI would be given leave of absence, come to the Consulate, be given a regular passport, put in a car with a Vice Consul and off to France. A lot of the kind of troubles tourists got into could have been solved by American Express, but would wind up in our hands. On the whole, I reaped the benefits of seeds planted seventeen years before.

Q: Well, before closing this, I'd like to go back to the FSI time just a bit to get your comments. This was the 65,66 period. You were the Dean of the School of Professional Studies. What did you see as the major problem with the training of professional studies for Foreign Service Officers.

CORTADA: For me, the main problem, at that time, rested on the basic arrogance of most senior officers. They felt no training in political science was needed, nor exposure to management skills. My own training was lopsided with economics as focal point. But in political science, it was not. When I was a diplomat-in-residence at UCLA, I made up for that deficiency. When I came back to Washington, I was as up to day in that field as any grad student in political science. I realized that a very large number of our officers did not have a background in political science and could not therefore interrelate everything that they would see overseas in their reporting, analysis, and projections. The first problem I had was to get the various bureaus to agree to support the concept of a political science faculty. That was my first problem. And the second problem that we had was these training courses were being used by the bureaus to dump officers that they didn't want.

Q: We used to call them "Training Officers." These were officers that were sent off...Your surplus officers always ended up in training.

CORTADA: I put a stop to that. John Stutesman, a very talented FSO came on board our school. I made him my Associate Dean. We divided our chores and he developed the mystique that only a bright guy gets put into any one of our courses. If you're dumb, we don't want you. And this was done in such a way that we would go out to Airlie House or somewhere, spend a week, working their heads off. It became a matter of pride to be assigned to these courses. I continued the efforts initiated by Jacques Reinstein in planning the four month economists' course which proved very successful. Jacques had laid the foundation for that. And then it was during my term that we implemented it. I took the decision to expose the first class to the graduate record exam. There was a certain amount of trepidation about this because if they failed, we were going to look like the south side of a north going mule before the Congress. But my thinking was that if it were that bad, then we didn't deserve to have the course. Well, they flew off the chart. My next instruction to the Chairman of the Department was make it tougher. Keep on raising the ante and let's see how much they can take. And sure enough, by the time we got the third course going, these graduates were as good as anybody with a master's degree. This is what happened. How these things have gone I don't know. I received the Superior Honor Award for what I did at the School of Professional Studies.

Q: Well, thank you. I'm running out of tape. This is a good time to cut. Well, thank you very much...

End of interview