

EDWARD G. ABINGTON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: this interview was not edited by Mr. Abington]

Q: Today is August 17, 2000. This is an interview with Edward G. Abington. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Shall we start at the beginning? Tell me when and where you were born and something about your family.

ABINGTON: I was born in March 1943 in Lubbock, Texas. My family on both my mother's side and my father's side were longtime Texas residents. My father was in the Air Force in World War II and continued with an Air Force career. I grew up moving every couple of years all over the country, the Philippines and Guam twice when I was young. Then I went to high school in Orlando, Florida and to university at the University of Florida.

Q: We'll be going back. Where did your father's family come from?

ABINGTON: They came from Louisiana and from Texas. The original Abington came to the U.S. in the early 1800s, immigrated to Louisiana from Ireland, and eventually the relatives had a plantation in Louisiana south of Shreveport which ended up getting destroyed during the Civil War, but the family stayed in Louisiana and also in Texas.

Q: Where did your father go to school?

ABINGTON: He went to Texas Tech for a while but he never completed college.

Q: And your mother's background?

ABINGTON: She was born in a little town near Lubbock, Texas, called Slaton. Her parents had come to Texas from Tennessee in the 1800s. Her father owned grocery stores. She went to North Texas State College for Women. Then she got a master's degree at Tulane University in sociology.

Q: Was she employed?

ABINGTON: She worked for a while, but like many women of that era, after she married and particularly after she became pregnant with me, she became a housewife and raising children became her profession.

Q: What was your father's specialty in the Air Force?

ABINGTON: He was an explosive ordinance officer in World War II. Then after the war was over, he became involved in the American nuclear weapons program, both testing and then the storage and the deployment of nuclear weapons for the Strategic Air Command.

Q: That must have made everyone in the family pretty aware of what was going on.

ABINGTON: Very much so. I can remember being in Florida in high school during the Cuban Missile Crisis in which the airplanes-strategic bombers, the B52s, and I think there were B47s at the time-were deployed out of McCoy Air Force Base. Meanwhile, lots of fighter aircraft came in as well as troops. Awareness of the international situation was very much a part of my life as I was growing up.

Q: How is it being an Air Force kid going to different places? Talk about your elementary education.

ABINGTON: I went to Guam when I was 6 years old. I was there first, second, and third grades. It was a marvelous experience. It was what every little kid dreams of in terms of just having fun. Housing was pretty terrible. We lived in Quonset huts that were converted into houses. I can remember going out playing on the runway of this air force base, sitting in the cockpits of American and Japanese aircraft left over from World War II, and riding my bicycle up and down the runway where there were old junked aircraft, playing in the jungle, climbing down cliffs, going to beaches, and so forth, snorkeling with my father, collecting seashells. It was a marvelous experience. And the school even at that young age, I can remember studying the history of Guam with mimeographed notebooks that the school had prepared. I was fascinated by it because the material talked about how Marianas became a Spanish possession and then later the United States took it over. And then the history of World War II and so forth. Even being in the first and second grade, the social studies aspect of school really made me fascinated with history and cultures and foreign affairs.

Q: Once you get a dose of that, you never get rid of it.

ABINGTON: Guam is an extraordinarily exotic place for a young boy. I still look back at it 45 years later with very fond memories.

Q: Where did you go when you left Guam?

ABINGTON: After Guam, we went to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where my father was assigned to Kirkland Air Force Base but coincidentally worked at Sandia at the nuclear labs there. He frequently was gone out to the Pacific and to Nevada where they were conducting nuclear tests. The thing about Albuquerque, I had a marvelous third grade teacher who specialized in American Indian culture. She would take us on field trips, bring in pottery. We learned how to make dyes from dried flowers and from dried sage and things like that which the American Indians had used for hundreds of years. I remember going on field trips with her to pueblos in New Mexico. I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a couple of years ago and I went to what was the village of the most famous 20th century American Indian potter, this Indian woman who is dead now but the pottery that she made is in museums and it's really marvelous. I can remember my parents taking me to meet this woman in the 1950s and watching her make pottery and talking to her. We purchased a couple of pieces of her pottery. It was a fascinating experience living in New Mexico at that time.

Q: As you were moving up, how about reading?

ABINGTON: At a very early age, 7 or so, my eyesight started to deteriorate. I became very nearsighted. At one point, the doctors thought I would go blind. In fact, it was progressive myopia. I can remember the first time that I got my glasses. My grandmother on my mother's side used to be a schoolteacher and she worked with me a lot to teach me how to read and then to instill a real love of reading. Throughout my youth I would always go to a library, whether it was on a military base in the Philippines or in Guam or in Albuquerque, and I checked out sometimes 12 books at a time, biographies, history books, adventure books. I have always been a very avid reader. It started when I was very young.

Q: This is a wonderful thing to get started on. After Albuquerque, whither?

ABINGTON: After Albuquerque we went back to Guam for a couple of years. I resumed shell collecting and wandering in the jungle. We had a beach house down on the beach and used to go hunting lobsters at night with spears and waterproof flashlights and cook the lobsters in a big pot on the beach. Again, it was a really interesting time.

From there, we went to the Philippines, Clark Air Base. My father was reassigned to Clark. I guess there I would have been in the eighth and ninth grade.

Q: This would have been about when?

ABINGTON: That was about 1955-'57.

Q: Was Clark a world apart?

ABINGTON: It was a world apart. It was a huge military base. I recall reading that Clark Air Base was the largest U.S. military facility in the world. It had everything. We lived on the parade ground of Clark Base where MacArthur had lived. We lived in an old house that was about 100 years old, mahogany, right in front of the parade ground. But we were not so isolated because my father had friends from World War II who had settled in Manila so that we frequently went to Manila and visited those friends. There were Americans married to Filipinos who had made their business there. These people basically were lumber exporters. I remember flying out to islands in the Philippines with them to look at trees that were being harvested and collecting shells and things like that. I had a real sense of being in the Philippines. It was not like what happens sometimes in the military where you go to a military base overseas and you never leave it. We always left. My father became active in the Boy Scouts and the Explorers and we used to take canoe trips on rivers in the Philippines and hikes in the jungles and things like that. It was a fascinating experience.

Q: Then off to where?

ABINGTON: Then we went to Florida in 1958, where I started high school. I spent 3 years of high school. I spent all 3 years at the same high school, which for me was a terrific experience.

Q: This is one of the problems of moving around so much. And high school is probably the most critical time.

ABINGTON: I could not have asked for a better experience in terms of high school. It was in Orlando, Florida. It was at the end of the Eisenhower administration with all that entailed in terms of an idyllic time. It was a segregated high school. I had not been around African-Americans enough to where I really thought about that as an issue. That was before the civil rights movement started in the U.S. The teachers were good. It was before there was a drug problem. It was before kids were out drinking and so forth. I had an all-American experience at high school, good friends, good clean fun, good teachers, a good academic environment.

Q: Let's talk about the academic side and then the extracurricular side.

ABINGTON: On the academic side, I've always been quite interested in social studies, history, political science, and so forth. I had really marvelous teachers in the humanities and English and geography and things like that. Because I had lived in different places, they encouraged me to speak about that. It seemed that the other students were quite interested in what I had done and where I had been and what I had experienced. I used to bring in slides from Guam and the Philippines and do slide shows and talk about what it was like to live there and so forth.

Q: I think you're very fortunate because I know my kids experienced, as so many Foreign Service kids do, they feel almost shut out when they go to a school in the States.

ABINGTON: Yes. That's true. I talked to Foreign Service kids who have that experience. But my experience was the exact opposite. My peers and my teachers were quite interested in where I had been and what I had done. I used to bring in my shell collection and show it and explain it and talk about the history of Guam or the Philippines. These people were interested.

Q: How about on the extracurricular side?

ABINGTON: I never had been much of an athlete, but I was very active in student government. I had elected offices and belonged to a number of clubs. The thing that was so good about the school was that being smart was encouraged and looked upon as a plus. Many of the football players were also in the honor society. So, you had a really good blend of academics and sports and student government and so forth. If you were smart but not athletic, then that was fine and you were accepted and encouraged. It was an extremely nurturing environment.

Q: I assume by this time with bad eyes this must have kept you from looking towards the Air Force as a career.

ABINGTON: I never really thought too much about the military as a career. It was not something that interested me. From high school on, I had an interest in cultures abroad, in history and government and foreign policy. Over time in college I drifted more towards those subjects and that pointed me in the direction of a diplomatic career.

Q: You graduated from high school when?

ABINGTON: In 1961.

Q: What was the feeling at school? The Missile Crisis was '62. Where were you then?

ABINGTON: I had started off in college at Texas Tech. I started off in pre-med, which was the wrong choice for me. I thought I wanted to be a doctor. My best friend was going to be a doctor and in fact became a urologist. I thought that that was what I should do. But I don't think that's where my interests or my talents were. So, I spent a year at Texas Tech. I didn't do very well at school and dropped out for a while. I was in Orlando at home working in 1962. We lived at McCoy Air Force Base when the Cuban Missile Crisis hit. My father was called off. He left when they moved the B52s out of McCoy but then they brought fighter jets in as well as troops by train.

Q: I take it the feeling was that the balloon might go up at any moment.

ABINGTON: Yes. It was an extraordinary time. People did feel, particularly being there in Florida, which was kind of like ground zero, there was real concern that there could be a U.S.-Soviet war over Cuba. Some people left and drove north. We stayed there the entire time. But people were really glued to their radios and televisions in terms of trying to figure out what was going on.

Q: After this interim period while you were figuring out how not to be a doctor, what were you after?

ABINGTON: At that point, I transferred to the University of Florida, which was closer to home and where a lot of my high school friends went to school. It was a much better fit than having been in Texas, which was a long ways away and I was kind of lonely. I stayed with pre-med for a little bit but then I switched over to psychology for a while. I also worked. I worked my way through college. I had jobs where I paid my tuition, my books, all my living expenses.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

ABINGTON: I learned how to be a surgical technician. Over the course of 4 or 5 years, I took part in 2-3,000 operations where I would set up the surgical table, do all the instruments, and would basically assist the surgeons as they were operating. That was a skill that was in demand. There was a teaching hospital at the University of Florida. It paid enough worked about 20 hours a week and carried about 17-18 hours academicallto pay my way through college.

Q: Did you find yourself being sucked back towards the medical side?

ABINGTON: Not really. If anything, the experience confirmed that I didn't want to be a doctor, that wasn't the right field for me. Eventually I changed my major to political science and history and I really enjoyed that tremendously. From that point on, I had a 4.0 average and it was quite clear that that was where my interests lay. It was not hard studying. It was fun learning.

Q: Was Florida concentrated on Latin America?

ABINGTON: To a degree, but there was a lot of Cold War studies. There was a professor, John Spanier, who had written books on the Cold War, on the Korean War. He wrote a very well known book on the Truman firing of MacArthur and the Korean War. The thrust of my studies was much more towards international relations and general political science, constitutional law and how interest groups work and so forth.

Q: Did the Foreign Service and diplomatic service cross your radar at all during this time?

ABINGTON: There were a couple of things. One, this was the time when the Vietnam War was starting to heat up. It became increasingly controversial on campus, although much less so in a southern school like Florida than out on the West Coast or up on the East Coast. Secondly, it was a time when the civil rights movement was really kicking off and people became much more aware of it. I participated in marches in Alabama and elsewhere on civil rights.

Q: Where did the University of Florida stand on integration?

ABINGTON: They were basically a segregated school, but during the time I was there the first black students started attending. The football team was all white. It was a white boy's football team.

Q: Was there disquiet at that time?

ABINGTON: There was some disquiet. The South at that time was still trying to come to grips with the past and with the fact that African-Americans were in a secondary position in just about all aspects of society and were fighting that. It was a time of controversy. It was not nearly as difficult as Alabama or Georgia or Mississippi or Louisiana but there was some violence, there were demonstrations with people being arrested, both white and black demonstrators.

Q: I would think in Florida you seem to have two cultures. One is sort of a real backwoods almost cracker culture as opposed to Miami, which had a very strong Jewish, international environment.

ABINGTON: Exactly. Florida was very much that way. An influence on me was a Foreign Service officer who was spending a year as a diplomat in residence. His specialty was Latin America. I remember going to a few lectures that he gave and talking to him about the Foreign Service. It sparked my interest. I became very interested in the Foreign Service as a career as a result of talking to him.

Q: Right now, I'm interviewing Pierce Bullen, who became an Arabist. He went to the University of Florida. He was grabbed by this, too. It's one of the places that probably sends people? I guess it's much more of an international feel, as you would get from the University of California or the East Coast. It's not a Midwestern look.

ABINGTON: I think the University of Florida by virtue of its location and Florida's interaction with Latin America had a more international outlook than other places. It was a state school. Some programs were good and some were not. There certainly was an environment that encouraged me to look beyond Florida. There were professors that encouraged that as well.

Q: You graduated from Florida when?

ABINGTON: I completed a bachelor's degree in '66 in political science and a master's degree in '67.

Q: What were you pointed towards at that point?

ABINGTON: I took the Foreign Service exam in 1966. I passed it the first time around and passed the oral exam. I got on the register. I very much wanted to go into the Foreign Service, but there was a hiring freeze on and they were not taking in any new classes at that time. So, there was a CIA recruiter on campus and I signed up for that. I filled out all the forms and was interviewed and got a security clearance. While my preference very much was the Foreign Service, it was the CIA that offered me a job. I ended up coming to Washington in the fall of 1967 and was brought on board the CIA.

Q: Could you tell me what your impression was of the CIA? How did they take a young person out of the university and what did they do with you?

ABINGTON: At that point, they did not have a very good training program. They just basically brought you on board and put you into a job and you learned on the job. I ended up working in the Office of Strategic Analysis. We were looking at Soviet defensive missile deployments in the Soviet Union and East Europe and doing analytical studies that were used by the military for strategic purposes, used to justify an American defensive military program. Basically there was no training. They just brought you on board, gave you a period of indoctrination, emphasizing security and sources and methods and put you in a job and had you start writing and analyzing stuff.

Q: If you're interested in the Foreign Service, was there a prospect of getting out and going overseas?

ABINGTON: I was brought on board to work in the Deputy Directorate of Intelligence, the analytical side, not the operations side. So, I do not know if there would have been a prospect for me to cross over into the operations side or not. The reason was that in May of 1968 I got drafted.

Q: So you were at the CIA '67-'68.

ABINGTON: Yes, not even a year at CIA.

Q: The CIA didn't give you any cover?

ABINGTON: No. At that point, my draft board was in Orlando, Florida. They were breathing down my neck. Exemptions that I had had as a result of being a student at the University of Florida had run out. I got drafted. The month that I was drafted was the month of the Tet offensive.

Q: January or February of '68.

ABINGTON: That was when I got the draft notice. That month they drafted 68,000 Americans. That was about the population of Gainesville, Florida, where I went to college. It was as if they had taken every man, woman, and child in Gainesville and put them in the military. The CIA didn't do anything.

Q: What happened with you?

ABINGTON: It was a pretty scary time. Casualties were high in Vietnam and anyone that was drafted felt that they were going to be cannon fodder. I tried to enlist as to go to OCS to become an officer. The Navy and the Air Force turned me down because of my eyesight. But I thought that the Army was going to accept me, although I really hadn't thought this through very well because the casualty rate for second lieutenants out of Army OCS was pretty bad in Vietnam. I arranged to report to Richmond, Virginia, to be inducted for OCS the day before I was due to report for the draft. I went down to Richmond. After some confusion, they told me that I had failed the physical for OCS because of my eyes. So I went back up to Washington and the next morning went back to Richmond and was drafted into the U.S. Army. I went to basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and I recall that I was the oldest person in the company of some 200 persons. I had the most education of anyone in the company. It was very interesting because I was kind of an oddity. Most of the people in the company were either blacks without a college education or whites without a college education or maybe one or two years. It showed that the draft managed to pick up mainly the people who couldn't afford to go to college.

Q: This was part of Johnson's unholy compromise. He basically kept a lot of the educated people from getting too involved in the war.

ABINGTON: There was one other guy who had been to college. He had been in the Foreign Service and was drafted while in the Foreign Service. But he and I were really the oddities in this company. I completed basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, and went from there to Fort McClellan, Alabama, for advanced infantry training, which was preparatory to going to Vietnam as a rifleman. As it turned out, while I was in training there, my mother died. I left training and went to Texas for the funeral and spent a week with family there. When I came back to Fort McClellan, I learned that I had been assigned to the Pentagon instead of being assigned to Vietnam, which the majority of the people in the company had been assigned to. I was sent to the Pentagon to work in the office of the Army Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence. There were 40-50 officers in this office, which was basically a current intelligence office. They prepared daily briefings for the senior Army leadership, the Army Chief of Staff on down. My job was to make viewgraphs to be used in the briefings.

Q: Projected overhead.

ABINGTON: Right. Also to make coffee, empty burn bags, sweep the floor, things like that.

Q: Was it 50 officers and one enlisted man?

ABINGTON: No, there were about six of them. But I was the gopher. I did that for eight or nine months and then I was reassigned to an Army intelligence unit, an analytical unit at the National Security Agency [NSA]. This unit worked with SIGINT [Signal Intelligence] to do order of battle. I was put into a small section of 5-6 people. I was the only enlisted man and there were 4 or 5 officers. As it turned out, I was the only one with a master's degree. I wasn't officially in charge of the unit, but I was substantively in charge of the unit. We were working on the Middle East. That was really my introduction to the Middle East.

Q: Why were we interested in the Middle East? This was '69-'70. Was this the confrontation period between Israel and-

ABINGTON: This was three years after the '67 war. At that point, Soviet military assistance stepped up and there were increasing confrontations between the Egyptians and the Israelis. This was the war of attrition back and forth across the Suez Canal.

Q: Were we looking mainly at what was happening to the Egyptian and Syrians?

ABINGTON: Yes, and also the Iraqis. We were very interested in what the Iraqis were up to as well both because of their disagreements with Iran, which had not yet flared up really seriously, but concern over Iraqi military intentions vis-a-vis Israel. They had participated in and sent troops to Syria during the '67 war. Then we were also watching what was happening in Jordan. There were foreign military contingents there. The Pakistanis had a military contingent in Jordan and Pakistani pilots were flying for Syria, Libya, for Jordan also. In fact, Zia ul-Haq, the former president of Pakistan who died in '88, was commander of the Pakistani military contingent in Jordan at the time.

Q: We were moving up towards Black September. That was September of '70. Were we picking up things about that at the time?

ABINGTON: Yes. At that point, there was growing tension between the Jordanian military and the PLO units in Jordan. There were increasing clashes between the PLO units and the Israelis. The Israelis were carrying out raids into Jordan. The Jordanian military was standing by and not doing anything. King Hussein was unwilling to commit the military either against the Israelis or against the Palestinians.

Q: This was around the time when King Hussein went to visit a military unit and somebody had a pair of women's panties-

ABINGTON: He tied a panty and a brassier to the radio antenna of a tank or a jeep to show the military was quite displeased with the way things were going.

Q: How did you bring yourself up to speed on these countries which probably didn't mean very much to you at the time?

ABINGTON: I did a lot of reading. I would read intelligence reports and studies and so forth. The Army used to put out country handbooks, which I would read and try to learn as much as I could about the countries that we were dealing with.

Q: How well did you feel our intelligence effort was plugged into the Israeli military and Israeli intelligence?

ABINGTON: I couldn't really judge that from where I was. The service branches? I did come away with a very strong feeling that when it came to strategic or national level intelligence, the service branches—Army, Air Force, Navy—simply didn't know what they were doing. They didn't have well-trained people. They did not have in-depth expertise. What they did was plagiarize the intelligence reporting done by CIA or State Department or whatever. The other very clear impression I came away with, particularly when I was at the Pentagon, was that these statistics that were used with regard to destruction of vehicles and the death of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers in Vietnam were totally phony. There was something called Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign of North Vietnam. I can remember these viewgraphs that we had to prepare saying "350 trucks destroyed" and so forth. After doing this a couple of months, you figure we're destroying several hundred trucks a day. If you multiply that by 30, you say, "Where are the Soviets, the Chinese, and the North Vietnamese getting all these trucks?" It became quite obvious that the statistics were meaningless. They were cooked by the military in Vietnam, by MACV, and fed to people back in Washington. They were baloney.

Q: Was there talk about this being baloney?

ABINGTON: There was some talk, but there was also just "Keep your head down. Go ahead and do it. Serve your time in the military and get out." That was in general everyone's attitude.

Q: Were you married at this point?

ABINGTON: Yes, with no children.

Q: What was the background of your wife?

ABINGTON: She went to the University of Florida. She was from West Virginia. She worked at Woodward and Lothrop when we were here in Washington and then at the Washington Post.

Q: Here you were in the military. We're talking about '68-'70. This was a time of huge demonstrations. Was there any problem being in the military at that time? How did you feel about that?

ABINGTON: I was very much against the Vietnam War but not to the extent that I was willing to go to Canada to avoid the draft. It set up a tremendous conflict in me. I was against the war but my father was a career military officer. I went to school in the South. It was a conservative environment that I grew up in. Basically, I just decided to do my time in the military and get out.

Q: Were you keeping your options open with the Foreign Service?

ABINGTON: Very much so. In fact, I was in touch with the State Department. While I was still in the military out at Fort Meade they offered me an appointment in a junior officer class in April of 1970. The military agreed to release me a couple of months early to join the Foreign Service. I ended up being discharged from the military one day and the next day- (end of tape)

The next day, I was sworn into the Foreign Service at the State Department.

Q: In April of '70. What was your basic officers group like?

ABINGTON: There were a couple of veterans from the military. We tended to be in the minority. There was one guy who had been a helicopter pilot in Vietnam and had received several medals for bravery. We became great friends and remain so to this day. His name is Ed Fugit. He's retired now and lives down in Tampa, Florida. I found as I looked at the biographies of the class that I was a combined USIA-State Department class. There were roughly 20% women. As I read through the biographies, I found it quite intimidating because the majority of people had gone to Ivy League colleges, had pedigrees that looked considerably more distinguished than mine and it made me wonder what I was getting into. Would I be able to compete with these people?

Q: I certainly had that feeling.

ABINGTON: Here I was, a kid who worked his way through college, went to a state university, not an Ivy League school, had been drafted into the military, didn't have any money or anything, and I certainly felt a little intimidated.

Q: In 1970 were you picking up any feeling about Vietnam?

ABINGTON: Very much so.

Q: What were you all up to? April '70 was the Cambodian incursion.

ABINGTON: Yes. There were demonstrations in Washington and a number of us from the Foreign Service class went out and participated in the demonstration against the Cambodian incursion.

The State Department had used the junior officer class to? When they brought people in prior to our class for several years, they had offered people appointment in the Foreign Service on the condition that they would join the CORDS program, which was a program for rural development in South Vietnam. People were brought into the Foreign Service, went through a junior officer class, studied Vietnamese, and then were sent off for a couple of years to Vietnam in this program. There was a real rebellion by preceding junior officer classes. My junior officer class was the very first one where the CORDS program was not a condition for coming in. I can't recall if people went to Vietnam or not. I think maybe one or two did. But you were not basically forced to go to Vietnam as a condition for coming into the Foreign Service. I can remember that as officials from the State Department came to lecture the junior officer class they were met with a large degree of skepticism and on some occasions real hostility in terms of our policy towards Vietnam and Cambodia.

Q: During your training, there was a petition sent around that became public opposing our moving into Cambodia. It became public and Nixon told the Secretary to fire those guys. Nothing happened.

ABINGTON: That was done in the immediate class before mine. That is where the whole CORDS thing collapsed. I had a friend who had been in that preceding class. As the junior officers sat down and started talking to each other in that preceding class, they found that some people were brought into the Foreign Service into the junior officer class under the CORDS program and were told, "The only way you can get into the Foreign Service is if you sign up for the CORDS program." Other people were brought in without that and it created a tremendous uproar within the class. They had a near rebellion when they met with State Department people and the people who were running the junior officer class. It was at that point where the State Department dropped the CORDS requirement. It was in that class that people signed the petition against the Cambodian incursion.

Q: How about training for the Foreign Service?

ABINGTON: I did the junior officer class and the consular class. I thought the training wasn't bad. It gave me some confidence vis-a-vis my classmates because as we discussed issues, as we went through scenarios about what would work and how you would act in certain circumstances, to me it was a real eye opener. I felt that some of the people who had these Ivy League backgrounds didn't seem to have any world experience. As they went through these scenarios, the kind of actions that they were advocating I thought were absolutely foolish, very ideological and so forth and simply wouldn't work. It made me realize in the junior officer class that good judgment is absolutely critical and if you don't have that you're not going to get very far in the Foreign Service. I felt that I brought a degree of maturity and good judgment to starting this new career that some of my other colleagues didn't have.

Q: You were picking up the peak of the time when if you were under 30 and you got a good education, you were invincible and were born without sin. It was a very ideological time. The people who rose up? There is something about having some time as an enlisted man that brings you down to earth.

ABINGTON: Absolutely. It's not only a humbling experience but to be drafted into the Army during the height of the Vietnam fighting is a very scary thing. It's one thing to demonstrate and be on campus and be against the war. It's quite another thing when you're faced with a draft notice and you have to decide what you're going to do and make decisions that will affect your future for years and years to come. Also, I didn't come from a privileged background. I worked my way through college. I feel like I pulled myself up by my bootstraps. That gave me some confidence and some maturity that some of my colleagues didn't have.

Q: It also probably knocked out a bit of the arrogance of the predominant mood among an awful lot of young people who were coming out of college in those days.

ABINGTON: I wasn't arrogant. I was scared. I was scared that I would fail.

Q: While you were there, did they give you choices? Were you at least mentally planning out an area or a specialization?

ABINGTON: Yes. They give you a list of posts and you put down 3 or 4 and then the people who run the junior officer class match up the person to the place and where the need of the Service is. I was interested based on my experience in the Army in the Middle East. So, I put down my first choice of Beirut and was assigned in the junior officer class to be a consular officer in Beirut and consular training and French language training. But I never got to Beirut.

Q: Did you have a language at the time?

ABINGTON: No. I think American universities, at least the University of Florida, were pretty weak in languages. I had some French but certainly not good enough to function.

Q: So what happened?

ABINGTON: It was the last week of the consular course. The person running the course called me up and said that in the Near East Bureau the country directorate for Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, there was a new junior officer position that had just been created. They had a big workload. Would I be interested in going over and interviewing for the job, meeting with the country director, Talcott Seelye? I said, "Sure." They said, "We normally don't assign people to the Department for their first tour. We like to send people overseas for their first tour. But if the country director likes you and offers you the job and you want to do it, we would assign you and break your assignment to Beirut." So, I went and interviewed with Talcott Seelye. I think he liked what I said. He offered me the job.

Q: I assume you pulled on your time dealing with the order of battle.

ABINGTON: Yes, I told him what I had done and what my background had been. He asked if I wanted to do it and I said, "Yes, I'd be very interested in doing it."

Q: So, you were in NEA from 1970 to when?

ABINGTON: From 1970 to 1972. I joined the Jordan desk as a junior desk officer in August of 1970 just a few weeks before the multiple hijackings which occurred on Labor Day and then led to Black September.

Q: This was when the PLO high-jacked three planes.

ABINGTON: That's correct. I think it was the PFLP, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine led by George Habash.

Q: What was the hierarchy? Talcott Seelye was what?

ABINGTON: He was the country director. Also on the desk were Tom Scotese, who became Ambassador to Yemen and in 1973 went in and opened up the U.S. presence in Damascus after the '73 war. There was Andy Killgore, who had been a Middle East specialist for 20-30 years. He became Ambassador in Doha. Peter Sutherland, who became Ambassador to a Gulf country. And for a very short period of time Pierce Bullen was in the office as well. He was a longtime State Department Arabist. The Assistant Secretary was Joe Sisco. Roger Davies was the principal deputy assistant secretary. Roy Atherton had responsibility for the Middle East Arab-Israeli issues. Talcott Seelye reported to Roy Atherton. Chris Van Hollen was the deputy for South Asia. There was another deputy for the Gulf, but I can't remember who that was right now.

Q: What piece of the action did you have?

ABINGTON: I joined the desk right before the hijackings. At that point, the situation in Jordan was very tense. There had been an assistant Army attaché that had been assassinated in Amman by Palestinians. They had come up to his house and shot him, killed him in his house. There had been a drawdown of the embassy. The ambassador was Harrison Symmes. He had been kicked out. The Jordanians had asked for his recall. At that point, the relationship between the CIA, the station chief, and King Hussein was much stronger than between Hussein and the American Ambassador. Symmes ran afoul of that relationship and did not have Hussein's confidence. As a result, Hussein asked for his recall. It was a time when a senior American delegation was going from Tel Aviv across the Allenby Bridge to Amman. They had a very risky time because of the PLO presence and it was a time in which Jordan was in tremendous turmoil. They were on an ice edge of whether the PLO was going to take Jordan over, overthrow the government. It was a very tense and uncertain time. That was the environment in which I joined the desk.

Q: Harry Symmes had told Joe Sisco, "Don't come." It wasn't safe. The King took great affront at this. This precipitated his recall.

ABINGTON: That's right. I wouldn't say it precipitated it. I would say that was the last straw.

Q: You were the new boy on the block, which is interesting because you're not coming in with preconceived ideas but you're listening. What was the feeling? Did they feel Hussein was going to make it?

ABINGTON: This was a time of great turmoil in the Middle East. There was the situation in Jordan which was extraordinarily unstable. The feeling was that it was very questionable whether Hussein was going to make it or not. I certainly think that that was the feeling in the NEA front office with people like Joe Sisco and Roy Atherton. It was also a time when Soviet involvement in Egypt was increasing. The War of Attrition, the artillery duels were heating up. The Israelis started carrying out penetration bombing of Egypt. The Egyptians had increasingly appealed for better Soviet fighter jet. Eventually the Soviet pilots started flying combat missions over Egypt and engaging in air clashes with Israeli fighter pilots. It was a time of danger and turmoil in the Middle East. The approximate cause was the Arab-Israeli conflict but the backdrop was the U.S.-Soviet competition over the Middle East. Of course, Kissinger was in the White House as the national security advisor. Rogers was the Secretary of State. Nixon was President. It was a time of high stakes and being a junior officer and getting a bird's eye view of this was fascinating.

Q: I imagine it was. Were you looking at Syria at the time?

ABINGTON: To a degree, but the Jordan crisis kind of overwhelmed people. On Labor Day I had been out and I got home and there was a phone call from Talcott Seelye. He said there had been these multiple hijackings. He asked if I would come in and pull the graveyard shift in the Operations Center. They were setting up a task force. At that point, the State Department and the Operations Center had not had experience in setting up a task force and in running a situation like this. Here you had multiple aircraft high-jacked, increasing turmoil in the streets of Amman, a new ambassador, Dean Brown. I remember a photograph of Dean presenting his credentials to the King. He was taken to the palace in an APC. The hijackings provided the catalyst for the confrontation between the Jordanians and the PLO. I spent 3 or 4 months working 7 days a week 12 hours a day in the Operations Center first with the high-jacking, then with the civil war and the threat of Syrian invasion of Lebanon and then the Israelis with U.S. urging, Kissinger working with Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin to really put the pressure on the Syrians to keep them out of Jordan. This was a geopolitical struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. I was this junior officer in a catbird seat watching all of this.

Q: The situation was that the Syrians were putting some armor down there and the Israelis more or less made it known that if they did they would come in and-

ABINGTON: The Syrians deployed armor but not air. They had deployed their air assets. Of course, Hafez El-Assad at the time was the chief of the air force and he refused to use Syrian air force. The army actually crossed the Syrian-Jordan border with tanks. King Hussein was increasingly frantic and was calling for U.S. and Israeli air strikes in order to fend off the Syrians. But as it turned out, the Jordanian army fought hard. They carried out a tank battle against the Syrians and defeated them. The Syrians withdrew back across the border. Meanwhile, Kissinger was masterminding this with Yitzhak Rabin. The Israelis made it very clear that if Syria were to invade Jordan, Israel would look upon this as a threat to its security and would act against Syria. The threats made by Israel, the action of the Jordanian military, and the very strong statements both publicly and privately by Kissinger and Nixon defused what could have been a situation that could have sucked the U.S. and the Soviets into something.

Q: Were the Iraqis part of the equation at this point?

ABINGTON: There was an Iraqi contingent in Jordan. Certainly people were keeping their eye on the Iraqis. But basically the Iraqis sat by and just watched what was happening.

Q: How about the Pakistanis?

ABINGTON: They were still there. There would be occasional air clashes between the Syrians and the Israelis. These were clashes between Pakistani pilots and Jordanians, but the Jordanians were very careful because their air force had been decimated in '67. But the Pakistanis were flying for the Syrians.

Q: What was the feeling that you were picking up from the desk about the Palestinians in Jordan and what their orientation was?

ABINGTON: There was deep concern because Hussein had been such a friend of the U.S. for such a long time. Hussein was looked upon despite his ill-considered decision to join Nasser in the '67 as someone who the U.S. could deal with, a friend of the West, a friend of the United States, anti-Soviet. There was very deep concern that Palestinians could overthrow the Hashemite regime and you would have a very unstable situation with the PLO taking over the East Bank, that it would become open to Soviet influence and perhaps Soviet presence. Quite clearly the stakes were felt to be extremely high.

I was up in the Operations Center during that period. I was there when Sisco and Atherton would come up. It was a small group that was running this whole thing. I was right there in the middle of it, occasionally writing end comments for Sisco or Atherton. I recall being in a room when Secretary Rogers came in and we set up a live teletype conference between Dean Brown in Amman and Secretary Rogers. Communications then were still relatively primitive compared to today. You didn't have voice communication because of the fighting. The only way that they could communicate real time was to have a communicator in Washington typing out the question for the Secretary and a communicator on the other end with Dean Brown there answering the question or giving his assessment. I think as a junior officer, a first tour officer, one cannot ask for a more exciting initial tour in the State Department unless you're in Amman on the ground.

Q: Were you getting any feel about Secretary Rogers and Kissinger on this issue?

ABINGTON: Yes. I was looking at it from a junior officer's viewpoint. As time went on, and this lasted over a number of weeks, it became increasingly clear that the shots were being called in the White House with Nixon and Kissinger and that Rogers was not a big player in it. Sisco was a player because Sisco, who was not really a career FS officer but a civil service person who became Assistant Secretary of IO because he was a marvelous bureaucrat, Italian origin? When you talk about Machiavellian, Sisco was that way.

Q: Did you have the feeling that you were part of a player?

ABINGTON: Yes. There was the feeling that because Sisco was there, the bureau was much more involved than would have otherwise been the case. To the extent that the State Department was a player in this drama, it was in large measure because of Sisco and his influence. It's very interesting. Sisco saw Kissinger as a rival and tried to take him on. I saw him take on Kissinger over Cyprus and lost. The interesting thing is that Sisco then despite his going head to head against Kissinger and losing, he managed to work with Kissinger and ultimately became Under Secretary for Political Affairs and a very important player in the peace process.

Q: While you were there, did you get any feeling for the attitude towards Israel?

ABINGTON: It was a very anti-Israeli feeling. I felt that some of the old-line Arabists had an unreconstructed view towards Israel, that it never should have been created, that it was a mistake, that it hurt American influence in the Middle East, that it was against our national interest. At times, I felt some of the views bordered on anti-Semitism.

Q: Did you see any parallel between some of the people you met at the University of Florida and people opposed to desegregation?

ABINGTON: These people came out of a different historical perspective and the State Department was a different place, in the past an elitist? much less open to the currents in American society and to a degree out of touch with American society and American politics. They possibly were bemoaning some of the individuals, Jewish influence and so forth. It seemed that they did not have a very sophisticated viewpoint of the American political system and how it operated.

Q: Within NEA, were there people who had served in Israel who were playing much of a role?

ABINGTON: The head of the Israel desk, Haywood Stackhouse, was a very fine man, had been the political counselor in Tel Aviv prior to becoming country director. You had another fellow named Walter Burgess Smith who was head of the Egypt desk. He was brought on board because he was a Sovietologist. He did not have Middle East experience, but Sisco put him in the job because he wanted someone with a Soviet background, which became very important in terms of the situation in '70/'71 when the Soviets were building up their presence in Egypt. Roy Atherton? I can't remember if he had served in Tel Aviv at that point or not. He had been in Damascus or Aleppo at the time of the '67 war. Roy had an extraordinarily balanced point of view. He was the DAS that my office reported to. He was just a very balanced person.

Q: Did you find that there were efforts within NEA to say, "Come on, fellows, let's take a look at Israel as being on the ground? Things aren't going to go back. Let's deal with the reality?"

ABINGTON: Oh, yes. I think if you look at people like Walter Smith, head of the Egypt desk, Stackhouse, head of the Israel desk, Joe Sisco, Roy Atherton, Roger Davies, they had a sophisticated point of view. You might hear frustration in dealing with Israel, but you didn't hear this kind of "Israel never should have been created" point of view that you heard from some people. The people who were in charge of the bureau, the influential people in the bureau, had a sophisticated point of view about Israel, its place, the conflict between the Israelis and the Arabs, and the overlay of Soviet-American rivalry in the Middle East because of the conflict. I never felt that people like Sisco and Atherton ever had this bias in the slightest.

Q: Talcott Seelye was the quintessential missionary kid.

ABINGTON: Yes. He was born in Beirut. His parents taught at the American University of Beirut. He grew up learning Arabic, immersed in that environment. A book written on State Department Arabists by Robert Kaplan, the cover photo that they used was Talcott Seelye presenting his credentials to President Bourguiba of Tunisia.

Q: What about the Soviet side? Were we looking at the Soviets coming in and mucking things up?

ABINGTON: Absolutely. It was an issue of tremendous concern. Sisco and Walter Smith had made several trips to Moscow to discuss the Egyptian-Israeli situation and to work with the Soviets to try to put some breaks on what is considered to be a dangerously escalating situation but without much success. Part of the reason that they were not successful in my view was that this war of attrition was going on and the Israelis were not willing to take casualties from artillery barrages along the Suez Canal. They therefore started carrying out deep penetration bombings of Egypt, including in the area around Aswan. That heightened Egyptian concern and Soviet concern. There was some fear that the Israelis might even go so far as to bomb the dam at Aswan. Doing so would have caused a catastrophic flood. Who knows what loss of life it would have caused. The Israelis by taking the initiative and not fighting the war the way that the Egyptians wanted to fight it escalated the fighting and the tension and created a situation where the Egyptians were increasingly desperate and turned to the Soviets. The Soviets felt that their prestige was on the line because Egypt was their client. That led to the deployment of more sophisticated surface to air missiles in Egypt, the dispatch of better fighter aircraft, and eventually to Soviet military pilots to fly combat air missions over Egypt. The Soviets I don't think ever crossed the Suez Canal, but they were fighting defensive missions in Egypt and on occasion engaging in air to air battles with Israeli pilots. That created a very volatile situation. Given the anti-Soviet cast of Nixon and Kissinger, this soon took on the cast of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation between our respective clients. So the Soviet aspect was something that preoccupied the NEA leadership on a daily basis.

Q: Was there any leader of the Palestinians that we identified? I can't remember when Arafat came on the scene.

ABINGTON: He was on the scene at the time I joined. He was in Jordan. He was head of the Fatwa. We pretty much looked upon all of the leaders of the various factions as being radical, as willing to carry out attacks of terrorishijackings and so forth as being a very destabilizing influence. Of course, at that time the Arab states were manipulating the Palestinian question to their own advantage and you had different Palestinian groups which were sponsored by Arab state Syria, Iraq, etc. often with Syrian troops funded by the Syrians. For example, Sifa was totally a Syrian creation. There were Palestinian leaders but it was funded by the Syrians. Syrian troops without uniforms participated as members of Sifa. They had bases in Syria and were trained there, etc. So, from the point of view of Washington at that point there were no moderate Palestinian leaders among the Fedayeen groups.

Q: In '70, how did this play out?

ABINGTON: I basically spent about three months in the Operations Center starting first with the hijackings. My role was to liaise with the families and the representatives of TWA and to brief them, to talk to them - it was almost like a consular role to feed them information such as we knew about the well-being of the passengers. The PFLP destroyed the airplanes, blew them up at Dawson's Landing, and then took the passengers and brought them to various places. It was an extraordinarily tense period because fighting had broken out between the Palestinians, the PLO, and the Jordanians. People did not know the whereabouts or well-being of the passengers. There were a number of Jewish Americans who were held captive. People were deeply concerned. Communications were uncertain between the embassy in Amman and the State Department. When the fighting really broke out, it was in the area where the embassy was located so that our diplomats could not get out. But we managed to be in touch with some of the hostages and some of the PLO groups. Some of them were held in the old Philadelphia Hotel not far from the embassy. Embassy officers managed to get there, talk to George Habash and other people. So, it was a fascinating period. As the hostages eventually were released, we returned to the fighting and monitoring it. The fighting went on for some time, maybe as long as a year, as the Jordanian army gradually mopped up and expelled Palestinian units from Jordan. By and large, these units ended up in Lebanon. Then there was kind of the reconstruction effort. After the fighting, the United States put together an aid package and tried to help put things back together in Jordan. I was involved in all these phases. First, it was the hijackings. Then it was the monitoring of the fighting and trying to ensure that the Jordanians were staying on top of the situation and not being threatened. And then working on the aid program, bringing in food and medicine and reconstruction. That took about 6 months.

Q: By the time you left then, it would be '72. Where did you go?

ABINGTON: At that point, I was hooked on the Middle East. One cannot imagine a more exciting introduction. In addition, I got a chance as a junior officer to work very closely with Joe Sisco. I would sit in as his staff aide. I became one of his favorite notetakers. He would always say, "Write down what I should have said, not what I said." It became somewhat of a joke at the reporting tables. Joe Sisco's meetings were frequently edited to reflect what he should have said. I worked closely with Roy Atherton. I did an awful lot of note taking for him. Roy encouraged me to stay interested in the Middle East. He helped me get an assignment to Tel Aviv. I went from the Jordan desk via French language training so I could get off language probation and then I went out to the embassy in Tel Aviv as a junior political officer. My responsibilities were the Golan Heights, what the Israelis were doing, their settlement activity, Gaza, and Israeli Arabs.

Q: Great. We'll pick it up the next time from '72. How long were you there?

ABINGTON: Until '75.

Q: Today is November 2, 2000. Before you went out to Tel Aviv, what were the words of wisdom you were getting first about an assignment to Tel Aviv and then what were you given to expect before you went out?

ABINGTON: At that time, the prevailing opinion in the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs in general was that serving in Tel Aviv was not something that would help your career if you wanted to study Arabic and go on and become an Arabist. But during that period you started seeing the development of more and more people who thought it important to serve in both Israel and the Arab world and instead of just an Arabist you had the development of an Arab-Israeli specialist. I replaced Wat Cluverius who was very involved in Arab-Israeli negotiations. I served there with Ned Walker, who is currently NEA Assistant Secretary and also was very involved in Arab-Israeli negotiations. Attitudes were starting to change concerning the old Arabist view of Israel and the problems it caused when I went to Tel Aviv in 1972.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you arrived there?

ABINGTON: For a relatively short period of time it was Walworth Barbour, who had been there for many years. His DCM was Owen Zurhellen. Barbour was an institution. He had been in Tel Aviv for 10-12 years, one of the longest-serving American ambassadors anywhere. Neither he nor Owen Zurhellen really had any background on the Arab side. The personnel policy of the State Department had been not to mix the two. You would have Arabists who had never served in Tel Aviv because of the fear that it would taint them and make them unacceptable for assignment to the Arab world, and you had people who would be assigned to Tel Aviv with no experience in the Middle East, which I always thought was a tremendous shortcoming. It seemed to me that for people in the European Bureau, their hardship tour was going to someplace like Tel Aviv. Quite frankly, in general, they brought a real lack of understanding of the issues to Tel Aviv. They tended to be relatively unbalanced in their appreciation. They tended to embrace the Israeli position on issues without taking into consideration the Arab position and the complexities of the two sides.

Q: You arrived there when?

ABINGTON: Late August/early September of 1972.

Q: What was the political situation in Israel at the time?

ABINGTON: It was a Labor government led by Golda Meir. Shimon Peres was in the cabinet, a young cabinet minister. Yitzhak Rabin was the Israeli ambassador in Washington. I arrived in Tel Aviv right about the time of the Munich massacre, the seizure by PLO elements of Israeli Olympic athletes at the Munich Olympics and a rescue attempt that went disastrously wrong and led to the death of 12 or so Israeli athletes. Any such terrorist incident really grips Israel. In a way, Israel has been through such trauma because of terrorist incidents that it seemed to me like the nation was many times verging on the edge of hysterical breakdown. It just shows the impact that terrorist incidents have within Israel. I recall taking a tour of the Israel-Lebanon border and listening to the radio of the events in Munich and the death of the Israeli athletes there. It was a very traumatic event for Israelis, as one would expect. To have young athletes going to an event such as the Olympics and being caught up in this kind of violence and then to die a very violent death was something that really affected the Israeli psyche tremendously. I think one thing that gets me about Israeli policy as I look at this today the fighting between Israelis and Palestinians around Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank is that the Israelis always adopt a policy of retaliation, of trying to make the Arabs pay a terrible price in loss of life and destruction of property. It seems to me that the Israelis have been doing this for 50 years and it has never worked but they can't seem to come up with a better policy whenever there are these kinds of difficulties. What happened after the Munich killings was that the Israelis went into Beirut and assassinated Palestinian leaders. I can't remember the precise timing but they may have destroyed Lebanese aircraft on the ground. This kind of retaliation that the Israelis have traditionally carried out ever since the founding of the state only fuels the cycle of violence between the Israelis and the Arabs.

Q: When you arrived there, you were in the political section?

ABINGTON: Yes.

Q: How would you characterize the outlook of the political section towards the situation?

ABINGTON: The Munich event certainly cast a pall over things, but one has to recall that when I arrived it was when the War of Attrition was going on between Egypt and Israel along the Suez Canal, the Israelis on their side of the canal behind what was the Bar Lev Line, there being clashes, artillery duels, occasional Israeli bombing raids into Egypt, the introduction of Soviet fighter pilots and so forth. So, there certainly was a degree of tension there, but in many respects for Israelis it seemed kind of far away because it was all taking place on the other side of the Sinai Peninsula. In that sense, the Sinai really did give a buffer to Israel. The casualties were overwhelmingly on the Egyptian side. The Israelis were shooting down aircraft whether they were Egyptian or Soviet piloted without any loss of aircraft on the Israeli side. The soldiers in the Bar Lev Line were pretty well fortified and took very few casualties. So, while there was a lot of tension, it was not as if there were casualties coming back to Israel. Also there was a tremendous feeling of complacency on the Israeli side and on the American side as well. The overwhelming ease of the Israeli victory in the 1967 war made Israelis and American analysts relatively complacent about Israel's military superiority vis-a-vis the Arab states. In a sense it was a little bit like business as usual in terms of dealing with the Arabs.

There was one event and as I started to get into my job going to Gaza that really struck me. The event was a Libyan airliner that strayed across into the Sinai. It was a Boeing 707 with 90-100 people on it piloted by French pilots. There were several American citizens on the aircraft. The aircraft strayed into the Sinai and Israeli fighters intercepted it. The Israelis had air bases in the Sinai. They tried to get the plane to land. For whatever reason, the pilot did not land. The Israelis strafed the wings, causing the aircraft to crash in the Sinai with the loss of almost all the people on board, including Americans. The thing that struck me about the reaction was that just about every Israeli that I talked to thought it was totally justified shooting down an unarmed civilian airliner. Some people said, "Well, the pilot may have been planning to carry out a suicide mission and ram the aircraft into a populated area in Israel," which I thought was pretty ridiculous.

The second thing was as I started going down to Gaza; As I talked to Israeli military government officials and Palestinians, I was really struck by the extraordinarily paternalistic attitude of the Israeli military in dealing with Palestinians. There were attitudes that 1) the Palestinians were a pretty wild and uncultured group of people, that Israel was sort of providing a civilizing mission by helping with schools and low cost housing and 2) that the only thing that the Palestinians really understood was force and if the Palestinians didn't behave themselves then Israel was totally justified in using very heavy force to bring them under control. It was shortly before I arrived in Gaza that there had been disturbances in refugee camps, and Ariel Sharon had been put in charge of dealing with this. His solution was to take bulldozers and just go through the middle of refugee camps destroying houses, telling Palestinians they had 30 minutes or an hour to pull all of their belongings out and to open up wide swaths of land within the refugee camps that Israeli jeeps could patrol in order to keep the Palestinians under control. This, needless to say, caused tremendous anger and resentment. The way the Israelis dealt with the Palestinians in Gaza and the general Israeli reaction to the shooting down of the Libyan aircraft seemed to me to show almost a racist attitude in dealing with Arabs.

Q: I've heard people who have served in both places say that South Africa during the high times of apartheid was not a bad comparison.

ABINGTON: It's an analogy that many people make. I'm a southerner and I experienced and saw racism in the South, in Louisiana and places like that. There seemed to be a real comparison between the racism I saw in the South, how some whites would treat blacks, and what seemed to be the general Israeli attitude toward Palestinians. I recall, I lived in an Israeli neighborhood, Ramat HaSharon. I was the only non-Israeli within in several blocks. It was a source of amusement to Israelis. Most diplomats lived in an area called Herzliya-Tichon, where the diplomats and the wealthy American or Anglo-Israelis lived. My neighborhood was very much a middle class one. Wonderful people. I made a lot of friends. But I was struck how talking to neighbors, they would never consider hiring an Israeli Arab to even work in such things as food processing plants because they viewed that as a security threat. There was such a total divide between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews, much less Israeli Jews and Palestinians. It was really striking.

Q: Your job was really to look at the other side of the moon, wasn't it, to look at the Palestinian side?

ABINGTON: Yes, very much. I was dealing a lot with the foreign ministry. I was in Jerusalem a lot talking to people about general Arab-Israeli issues. It was not just Palestinians I was dealing with, but also reporting on broader Israeli-Arab issues as well. I certainly was not delving into Israeli society or Israeli domestic politics.

Q: What was the impression you got from your fellow political officers about how we viewed dealing with the Golda Meir government?

ABINGTON: In general, there was quite a close relationship. Golda was a very crusty, temperamental person. I go back to what I said earlier. In general, you had people serving in the embassy in Tel Aviv who had no experience at all of dealing with Palestinians or Arabs. At that time, there was a very good Israeli-U.S. bilateral relationship and people in the embassy in general seemed to be very supportive of that relationship. They tended to be quite pro-Israeli and I thought relatively uncritical in the way that they looked at Israeli policies.

Q: How did you go about your job?

ABINGTON: I would drive down to Gaza and stay in the UN beach club for a night or two. I would set up appointments and go around and meet Palestinian businessmen, some of the leading families in Gaza, ones that were politically active, although political activism at that point was not particularly high on the part of Palestinians. I would set up appointments with the Israeli military government in Gaza. I'd go in and talk to them. I would drive around Gaza, observe Israeli settlement activity, talk to Israeli settlers about what they were doing in terms of building settlements. I talked to UN personnel to try to get a general sense of what was going on. Gaza at that time was a wide open area. There were no fences or anything. The only way you knew you were in Gaza was that there were a couple of 50 gallon drums, the green line between Israeli and Gaza. When you went past the 50 gallon drums, you knew you were in Gaza. At that time, a lot of Israelis would take their cars down to Gaza to be repaired. They would go and shop there because produce and other things were a lot cheaper. You would see a fair number of Israelis down in Gaza. But it was very interesting. I remember staying once at the UN beach club. Palestinians were not allowed on the beach at night because the Israelis would run a truck or a jeep along the beach dragging something behind it that would obliterate all of the footprints. If a Palestinian were caught on the beach at night, the presumption was that this was a terrorist. They would be shot. Someone had walked out of the beach club at night down to the beach and walked back and an Israeli patrol saw the footprints. A detachment of Israeli soldiers surrounded the beach club and basically roused everyone out to make sure that Palestinians had not infiltrated and come into the beach club. So, it was a mixed atmosphere there.

Q: When you were talking to the Palestinian leaders and the businesspeople, what were you getting from them as far as how they saw the situation there and how they viewed the United States?

ABINGTON: In general, Palestinians were not that politically energized at that point. The PLO was an illegal organization. The PLO in '72 was under attack in Jordan and was on the point of being banished from Jordan. The Israelis were pretty ruthless in clamping down on any political activity that could be interpreted as being pro-PLO. It was illegal to post or show colors that were in the Palestinian flag. For example, if you displayed those colors in some fashion, you would be subject to arrest by Israeli security forces. What the Israelis would allow to operate were relatively quiescent Palestinians who didn't cause any problems. In particular, the Shawa family in Gaza had ties to the Jordanians. I can't remember if he was mayor of Gaza or looked upon as the de facto mayor; El Rachid Shawa, had great cache because he could hand out Jordanian passports to Palestinians that he determined would get them. For a Palestinian who had trouble traveling because he or she had no nationality and no passport, only a UN laissez-passer, having a Jordanian passport was a tremendous advantage. That was a way of currying political favor by the Shawa clan. The Israelis let that go on because in general they favored Jordanian and Palestinian links as opposed to the influence of the PLO.

Q: Here you had this situation where it's not a good idea to have a bunch of people with no particular hope or economic ability to get out and do their thing. When you're repressing people who are not stupid, who have real commercial or political abilities, to keep them barefoot and pregnant, it's a problem. Was this a concern of ours?

ABINGTON: Not particularly. Policymakers and senior people in the embassy were looking much more at the broader interstate relationship Egypt-Israel, Syria-Israel, Jordan-Israel. There was relatively little concern about the Palestinians. To the extent that the Palestinians were really factored into things, it was as Jordanian subjects. The attitude of how you dealt with the solution of the Palestinian problem was as part of Jordan. So, at that point, Palestinian nationalism and the concept of a Palestinian state really wasn't on our radar screen and certainly wasn't on the Israeli's radar screen because Golda Meir scoffingly dismissed the notion that there even was a Palestinian people. She said there was no such thing.

Q: You mentioned Israeli settlements in Gaza. How was this developing?

ABINGTON: Generally what happened with settlements both in Gaza and in Golan and I assume to a degree in the West Bank was that the Israeli army would go in and set up an outpost. They had a unit called the Nocho unit, which was an extension of the Zionist movement. They would be young Israelis who would go in and basically build up the infrastructure of the settlement. It would be a military outpost but over time they would build it up and turn it over to one of the Zionist kibbutzim movements. This was taking place in Gaza where there would be an army unit confiscating land, putting up fences, putting up housing, putting up guard posts and so forth, and then developing the infrastructure. Then they would turn it over to some kind of a settlement movement. Civilians would move in and the army would move out. Needless to say, this caused very deep resentment by Palestinians. The Gaza Strip at the time and to this day is certainly one of the two or three most densely populated areas in the world. What the Palestinians saw then was Israelis coming in as soldiers or civilians, fencing off arable land, and dominating the use of water supplies, limiting the Palestinian ability to use the water, and taking away arable land in an area where agriculture was the only thing going.

Then there would be other Israeli measures that were in place as well. Palestinians could not build a house without an Israeli building permit even if they owned the land. Palestinians could not add an extra story onto their house unless the Israelis agreed to it. This wasn't always strictly enforced, but there certainly were occasions where if someone built an extra story, the Israelis would go in and knock it down. In general, the policy was one of suppression and real domination of the Palestinians. There was no doubt that it created a growing resentment on the part of the Palestinian population towards the Israelis.

Q: How about your reporting? Was there any market for reports on what was happening?

ABINGTON: Not too much. Frankly, at that point I don't think people really cared about the Palestinians or what was going on. But certainly in terms of the embassy, and this continued throughout the years when I was there, there was a general unwillingness to accept that the Israelis were less than perfect in terms of dealing with Palestinians. I can recall later on tremendous controversies between the American Consulate in Jerusalem and the Embassy in Tel Aviv over the question of whether the Israelis tortured Palestinians. The embassy just flat denied it. Of course, the Israelis denied they were torturing people even though the consulate in Tel Aviv did some fairly credible reporting. Once the U.S. in the '80s started doing human rights reports, it was very clear that there was pretty wide-scale torture and mistreatment of Palestinians by the Israelis to the extent that it was even enshrined in law. There were Israeli policies on how they would torture people, how they would torture Palestinians. But in general, the embassy in Tel Aviv was very closely identified with Israel and with Israeli policies and tended to be pretty uncritical in the way that they reported such policies.

Q: Did you find yourself doing the normal work but not getting too disturbed about what you were seeing or were you the odd man out?

ABINGTON: I was sort of odd man out in dealing with the Palestinians. Most of my colleagues were dealing just with Israelis and they tended to dismiss the mistreatment of Palestinians as either they didn't believe it or they accepted the Israeli line of why it was necessary to do this. In general, there was an uncritical embrace of Israeli positions and not much willingness to look at the other side. One has to keep in mind that Israel then and even now is an incredibly intense place. The Israelis have a circle the wagon mentality. You're either with us or against us. There was a lot of psychological pressure on people to stand with the Israelis. That certainly was the case with the staff and personnel of the American embassy.

Q: Did you get involved with the Israelis arresting American Palestinians?

ABINGTON: No, not at all. I can't recall that that was even a particular issue. I did work in the consular section for a short period of time. I knew people in the consular section. But I can't recall that in the '70s or at least as long as I was there until 1975 the issue of Palestinian-Americans being arrested was a particular issue as far as Embassy Tel Aviv was concerned.

Q: Were you seeing a difference or a change? How was the Likud element viewed at that time?

ABINGTON: Likud was looked upon as a pretty marginal party. I recall meeting Begin, the Likud leader in the Knesset. Prior to the '73 war, Likud was not looked upon as a serious contender to take over the Israeli government. That changed later in the '70s after the '73 war. Up until that point, the Israeli government had been dominated since its founding as a state by the Labor Party in coalition governments with some of the religious parties like the National Religious Party. No one at that point really took very seriously the possibility that Likud might win an election and form a government running Israel.

Q: How about the religious parties? Did we have much contact with them?

ABINGTON: There was a person in the political section who spoke Hebrew who followed domestic politics. Israeli politicians were always quite accessible to people from the American embassy. I recall Ned Walker did the job for a while. He used to see people in the NRP. The focus was on parties in the government and not so much on the parties out of the government. I don't think that there was a lot of attention paid to Likud. There was not much attention paid to the Sephardic element of the Israeli population, which today is extremely important. Back then, the Sephardi were relatively poor. The society politics were totally dominated by Ashkenazis. Although this was a developing issue and problem, it had not assumed very much prominence. I don't think that the political section paid much attention to the Israeli Sephardi.

Q: Did you find yourself feeling the affects of the political realities in the U.S. of particularly the pro-Israeli elements? Or was this an undercurrent that everybody understood?

ABINGTON: It seemed to me that it was not so much an issue. The bigger issue was the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Kissinger was Secretary of State. We were allied with the Israelis while the Soviets were allied with Egypt and Syria. We tended to look at matters much more in a Cold War framework than in terms of a pro-Israeli U.S. policy. That was the intellectual framework that Henry Kissinger laid out while Secretary of State. Of course, this whole dynamic changed with the 1973 war.

Q: Our consulate general in Jerusalem took care of the West Bank and all that?

ABINGTON: Yes.

Q: So that wasn't in your purview?

ABINGTON: No. I would go and occasionally meet with people in the consulate and we would compare notes with each other on the Palestinian issues. But Gaza was a backwater at that point. Politically, socially and culturally the West Bank and East Jerusalem was much more important. But even so, the Palestinian issue was not a very high profile issue at the time.

Q: Were you at all looking at the Israeli Arabs?

ABINGTON: I was. The Israeli Arabs were? I would go into Nazareth from time to time and meet with community leaders and Israeli Arab Knesset members, all of whom supported the Labor Party. In general, the Palestinians looked upon Israeli-Arab politicians as people that were going along with the Israeli policies because they had been bought off. There was a lot of discrimination against Israeli-Arabs. They were subject to discriminatory economic policies, discriminatory social and security policies. But they were not politically active or strident and they didn't have that much importance because they were not a critical factor in terms of the Israeli Labor government's being in power. The Labor government through its alliance with religious parties could take or leave Israeli-Arab political support.

Q: Talk about your personal experiences and then what happened when the October War came.

ABINGTON: I enjoyed tremendously serving there. It was a fascinating and very dynamic society. There were issues that were very interesting and Israelis were quite accessible. They were much more politically active on the Palestinian side. Frankly, people in the embassy or in Washington were simply not concentrating on the Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza at the time. They were politically disorganized and so much under Israeli domination that they weren't an issue. To the extent that Palestinian nationalism was looked at, it was in the context of Arafat, the PLO, what was taking place in Jordan...

Q: This was the Black September.

ABINGTON: Right. And then moving on to the Palestinians, moving on to Lebanon, and Arafat setting up his base of operations there. Of course, during that period Palestinian terrorism was starting to develop. I recall having been out at Ben Gurion Airport three or four times when aircraft had been high-jacked there by PLO members. I recall a raft of Palestinian terrorists landed a block from the embassy in Tel Aviv. I had been at the embassy watching a movie and I was driving back towards Jaffa and ran into gunfire between the Fedayeen and Israeli police. These Fedayeen seized a hotel, which as it turned out was a brothel, just a block and a half from the embassy. But Palestinian terrorism was becoming very much a fact of life in Israel during that period.

Q: Were you in Israel during the '73 war?

ABINGTON: I was.

Q: What was your experience when it broke out?

ABINGTON: In the week before the war, the Israelis were very concerned by military moves that they were seeing on the ground in Egypt and in Syria, particularly in Egypt, and they didn't know what to make of these moves. They asked us for our assessment whether these were just routine fall military exercises that happen when it's much cooler and before the rains start, or whether this really signaled that the Arabs were up to something. On both the Israeli side and the American side both on the political level, the State Department level, the CIA level, we had become complacent about how we looked at the Arabs. We felt that they had been so decisively defeated in 1967 that they would be very foolish to contemplate military action against Israel because Israel could defeat them just as quickly with as few casualties as in '67. And that certainly- (end of tape)

The day before the war started, it was the day before Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur the embassy closed down and everyone stayed at home. No one drove or anything. We did one last round of checking. The assessment continued to be that there were some questionable military moves going on but it really didn't signal a move towards hostilities. But there was a lot of uncertainty on the part of our military attaches, on the part of the CIA station at the embassy, on the part of the ambassador and the DCM. The ambassador was Kenneth Keating, the former senator from NY who had been ambassador in India and who had been defeated by Bobby Kennedy in NY. Nick Veliotis was the DCM. So, we all went home on Yom Kippur Eve. Everybody was pretty much housebound for the next 24 hours. Very early in the morning on Yom Kippur, October 6, at about 6:30 or 7:00, this jet flew over my neighborhood at a very low level. It sent shockwaves it was flying so low and slow. I just felt that there was going to be a war starting that day because I knew that the Israelis would not have done that if there had not been something very serious. As I got dressed and went outside, I could see that the reservists were being called up and neighbors whom I knew were coming out of their houses in their uniforms, getting ready to go. I called up the DCM and told him this and he said the same thing was happening in his neighborhood.

Q: We'll pick it up next time.

Today is December 14, 2000. What do you do when you see the reservists coming up?

ABINGTON: The first thing was that the word went out to all of the people in the embassy that it appeared that hostilities were eminent between Israel and its neighbors. I know that late in the morning Veliotis and Ambassador Keating were called to see Golda Meir at the defense ministry in Tel Aviv. This was during Yom Kippur in which there is no traffic on the roads and cars that were on the roads during that day would be stoned. But this was a very different Yom Kippur for Israelis. Veliotis and Keating went to the defense ministry. Golda Meir informed Keating that Israel had information that it considered to be irrefutable that Egypt and Syria were about to launch military attacks against Israeli forces. Israel had decided that it would not preempt but that it would see what Egypt and Syria would do. Part of the decision not to preempt was that Israel simply wasn't prepared to do so because it had been so confused by deceptive Egyptian and Syrian military moves that it was not in a position militarily to preempt. What was happening on that day was a massive call-up of Israeli reservists. Veliotis called people into the embassy and we went through the process of organizing how we would handle this in terms of reporting. The office of the defense attaché^{1/2} was extremely important in terms of liaising with the Israeli military. But then the political and economic sections were also doing their reporting. The administrative and consular sections had responsibilities for getting the word out to people within the embassy community that hostilities were expected and more broadly to Americans in Israel, for which the consular section was responsible.

Hostilities started at about 2:00 PM on Yom Kippur.

Q: Was the feeling that the Israelis would take care of this as they always had?

ABINGTON: I think that opinions were mixed on this. The Israelis were very overconfident. Defense Minister Moshe Dyan that day or shortly thereafter made a very threatening statement that Israel would break the bones of the Egyptians and the Syrians and would really teach them a lesson. There was a great deal of overconfidence on the part of the Israelis in general but also the defense establishment and the intelligence establishment because they did not fully appreciate how the shipment of Soviet arms, particularly surface to air missiles that had much greater capabilities than in 1967 and especially the use of tow missiles by Egyptian soldiers, would change the battlefield. It's an optically guided missile with a shake charge on it that was used against Israeli armor. Israel depended very much for its victory in 1967 first on this air force and then secondly on its armor. The Egyptian and Syrian tactics were to deny Israel air superiority through the use of Soviet surface to air missiles, particularly the SA3 and the SA6, which were effective against low to medium flying aircraft, the Israelis did not lose a single aircraft in the '73 war to air to air combat. But they lost an awful lot of aircraft as a result of these surface to air missiles. They did not have the tactics that were developed later in terms of radar jamming and stuff like that. This was a real shock to them. Unable to have air superiority, it meant that the Egyptian and Syrian militaries were able to advance their armor and it lessened the effectiveness of Israeli armor. Without the combination of air superiority and superiority on the ground with armor, the Israeli advantage was much diluted. In the Sinai, what surprised the Israelis there was not only the use of surface to air missiles but the discipline of the Egyptian soldiers who did not break and run as they did in '67, although if you're being attacked from the air with absolutely no defense, any army would break and run. Their previous experience had set up an attitude on the part of the Israeli military that led them to grossly underestimate the military capabilities of the Egyptians and the Syrians.

Q: Had that attitude spilled over to the embassy?

ABINGTON: I think it did. In general, embassy people were without area experience or Israeli experience. Many of the people at the embassy generally tended to reflect Israeli perceptions. There was not enough critical questioning of attitudes and so forth. This was not entirely the case. Nick Veliotis was a brilliant person who was much more questioning in terms of Israel and Israeli assumptions. Ambassador Kenneth Keating was in relatively fragile health.

Q: He was elderly.

ABINGTON: Yes. He had been ambassador in India. His appointment to Israel had been delayed because he had suffered a heart attack. Then he recovered from the heart attack and was nominated and came out to Israel. But he wasn't in the office more than two to three hours a day. His intellectual abilities were much impaired. He was not really into the substance of the issues. He was very pro-Israeli to the point of lacking credibility. Frankly, there was a widespread assumption that he was exactly the kind of ambassador that Henry Kissinger wanted at that time. Kissinger had become Secretary of State. Kissinger really worked the U.S.-Israeli relationship from Washington. The ambassador was Yitzhak Rabin and he was the conduit for information, consultation, request for U.S. military assistance, etc. And the embassy to a large extent was out of it. Certainly Keating was not relied upon in Washington and was not taken seriously in Washington as an astute observer or representative of American interests. In fact, Veliotis told me the story of how Keating, who had been a brigadier general or a major general in World War II, got carried away with this and said he was going to resign as ambassador and offer his services to Golda Meir to fight for Israel. Veliotis had to calm him down. That's an indication of how Keating really was not a serious individual.

Q: Then what did you do? How did you operate?

ABINGTON: The first couple of days of the war were a tremendous shock for Israelis. Israel really went into a war footing. There was a blackout at night. You had to put blackout curtains or blankets on your windows and they had wardens who walked around and if there was any light visible, they would knock on your door and tell you either to seal that off or to turn your lights off. The headlights of cars were painted with blue paint which gave out just a very dim light at night. It led to numerous accidents and a lot of casualties. Israeli ammunition trucks were running into each other and blowing up. They turned out the traffic lights, for example. Anyone who drove in Israel during that time knew how hazardous Israeli drivers were. You can imagine what it was like with young soldiers driving at night with no vehicle lights and no traffic lights. There was a tremendous shock to the Israeli body politic within the first week of the war. The Israelis did not crush the Egyptians and Syrians as had been the case in '67. The Israelis were suffering high casualties. They were losing lots of armor. The Egyptians had crossed the Suez Canal. They had seized the Bar Lev Line. They had advanced in the Sinai. They had brought armor and artillery and surface to air missiles over. The Egyptian anti-tank units which would be two to three individuals armed with tow missiles, Sagger missiles, were knocking out lots of Israeli armor. The Israelis came to realize fairly quickly that they were facing a very different situation than in 1967 and a very grave one.

Q: What did you do?

ABINGTON: What we tried to do was through conversations and through the press and other things to give a daily sense of what Israeli leaders were saying publicly, what the mood was. There was reporting that was being done in various channels. In 1973 the communications revolution had not taken place. Embassy reporting was much more important in terms of giving a daily feel for what was taking place. You did not have CNN. You did not have instantaneous reporting on the battlefield as you have today. You did not have the kind of communications hookups so that either television or radio was picking up on an almost instantaneous basis what Israeli leaders were saying. So, the military attaches were working 20-24 hours a day around the clock in close contact with their Israeli counterparts. The CIA station which basically had a liaison relationship with the Israelis was in close touch with Mossad for their assessment. The political section was talking to the foreign ministry and reporting on what the politicians were saying, what the mood was, etc. The embassy pretty clearly charted how difficult the situation became for the Israelis within the first few days. The Israelis started running out of certain types of ammunition. They really started panicking because their whole force structure had not been developed to meet this new Egyptian-Syrian threat either to deal with the surface to air missiles, to deal with the Sagger anti-tank missiles, or to deal with the artillery barrages that particularly the Egyptians were putting down. The Israelis were deficient in artillery, particularly 155 millimeter artillery. They were deficient in certain kinds of armor piercing ammunition. Their stockpiles started running out because their planners had planned for a much shorter and less intensive battle. There is a saying that all armies prepare for the last war. That was the case with the Israelis. They prepared for the '67 war, not the '73 war, and the '73 war was of much different magnitude than was the case in '67. The Israelis really started panicking and turned to the United States. The request went both through our military attaches but primarily through Ambassador Rabin in Washington to the White House to Kissinger, to the Defense Department, that they needed help. It was at that point that the United States started planning an airlift of essential military supplies to the Israelis using the C5As which had just come on line.

Q: These are very large cargo planes.

ABINGTON: Yes, jet cargo planes, at that time with the largest lift capacity of any aircraft in the world. The airlift was both symbolic in terms of a sign of U.S. commitment and also important in bringing certain parts that the Israelis desperately needed. Even an aircraft that big could not bring the kind of assistance that you need to fight a war simply because there is too much heavy equipment that's needed that you can't airlift. The only way to get that kind of material is by sea. In fact, the United States started shipping stuff by sea, but the turnaround time from when you gathered up the material, sent it to the ports, put it on the ship, and sailed across was probably three weeks. At the rate the fighting was going on, there was no way that the United States could send tanks and other equipment APCs, ammunition from the U.S. to Israel and arrive in time to affect the outcome of the battle. What the United States did symbolically and I can remember sitting at the embassy in Tel Aviv when the first C5As started arriving, it was in the afternoon. These aircraft approached Israel flying into Ben Gurion Airport over Tel Aviv, these huge aircraft. It was a tremendous morale booster for Israelis. They were really demoralized at the time. For them, it was a very solid sign of American support. To see the aircraft come in on a daily basis really lifted the morale of the State of Israel in a way that can't be calculated. What the planes brought in were specialized parts for aircraft. Israel had many American aircraft F4s and Skyhawk aircraft which were A7s.

Q: Those are attack planes.

ABINGTON: Yes, although the Phantom jet was used both for air superiority and ground support. The Israelis desperately needed certain spare parts that could be flown in with these aircraft. They needed certain kinds of ammunition, particularly armor piercing tank ammunition which came in. The U.S. flew in a few APCs and tanks but that was more of a symbolic gesture. It received a lot of publicity both in Israel and internationally. Of course, there was the international dimension to the support of the United States. Kissinger and Nixon framed this issue in a Cold War-U.S.-Soviet framework. They felt that it was essential that the U.S. stand behind its ally in the region, Israel, while the Soviet Union was supporting Syria and Egypt. So, the symbolism of the U.S. sending APCs and tanks to Israel by air was important as a sign of U.S. commitment, but the impact upon the Israeli military was non-existent. It was during this period? I have to emphasize that the show was really run out of Washington by Kissinger, who worked hard during this period to bring about a cease-fire, a very delicate task because the Egyptians and the Syrians initially resisted a cease-fire because they were advancing. The Israelis wanted one. The tide started to turn first in the Sinai. General Ariel Sharon played a key role in the tank battles that took place down in the Sinai. There was one particular tank battle at a place called the Chinese Farm, so called because there is a Chinese agricultural project there, which was one of the largest tank battles in history. It was a decisive battle from the Israeli point of view. They blunted the Egyptian attack in the Sinai. They moved to secure a foothold on the other side of the Suez Canal. They gradually expanded that foothold and surrounded and put at risk the Egyptian Third Army, a very sizeable force. Having gained control of the battlefield in the Sinai, the Israelis turned their attention to the Golan. In the Golan, the fiercest tank battles took place. It was over a very small territorial unit, which made it even fiercer. The Syrians came very, very close to breaking the Israeli lines and to bringing their tanks down from the Golan Heights into northern Israel and very close to seizing a key bridge across a river down in the Hula Valley, which would have been very devastating for the Israelis if that had taken place. But the ability to control the battlefield in the Sinai allowed the Israelis to shift armor up to the Golan. Israelis also gradually gained air superiority in both the Sinai and the Golan. It allowed the Israelis to hold on to the Golan Heights. But it was a close call for the Israelis in the Golan.

Q: An embassy's priority is protection of American interests, which in this case would mean Americans. There were a lot of Israelis who also had American passports. Getting them out of harm's way? What was happening?

ABINGTON: Because it was a war, commercial airliners stopped flying into Israel. All the American carriers stopped and so did most of the others. Maybe the only airliner flying in and out of Israel was El-al. A lot of Israelis who had been abroad came back to Israel to fight, to join reserve units. There were volunteers that came to Israel at the time. Dennis Ross, the current Middle East envoy, came to Israel and was there during the '73 war. So was Martin Indyk, our current ambassador to Israel, although at the time he was an Australian, not an American citizen. They were there during the '73 war. Indyk worked in some kind of a food processing plant in '73 because the Israeli males had been called into the reserves. You did not have that many people leaving. Because of the war, we couldn't evacuate any American dependents. So there was no real evacuation of people from Israel. There was just no way to get them out and there was no time to get them out either. I can recall that one Sunday the air raid sirens started sounding in Tel Aviv and we were all instructed to go down to the basement of the building. The Egyptians had been flying some TU16 bombers off the coast of Israel in the Mediterranean and they had launched missiles at Tel Aviv and these missiles were really in essence unmanned MIG15 aircraft which carried a big explosive charge. The Israelis shot them down but the fact of air attacks on Tel Aviv shook people up a lot. From the point of view of protecting American citizens, there was not a lot to do other than try to reassure people, to tell them to obey Israeli blackout instructions and so forth, and to be prepared to leave quickly, to have their possessions, their papers in order, if it was possible to get people out. But there basically was no evacuation during this war.

I want to point out that the role of the defense attaché's office at that time was really critical. In terms of giving assessments, daily briefings, hourly briefings by the Israeli military to our defense attaches, who in turn did their cables and reports? You didn't have the kind of real time satellite intelligence that you have today. Satellite reconnaissance at that time was pretty bulky and was much more difficult to download the stuff. It was through parachuted film canisters.

Q: They would orbit over and then parachute down.

ABINGTON: So you didn't have real time digital intelligence the way we have today. The defense attaches played a critical role. Fortunately, we had a staff of highly professional officers who did an absolutely superb job during this period.

Q: Were they reflecting at all the disquiet that was coming from our military, from the Pentagon, that we were giving supplies that should be used in case the Soviets attacked across the Fulda Gap and all that?

ABINGTON: No, not at all. They were looking at it from the other perspective. What you mention is a broader perspective that they simply didn't have. They were looking at it very much from the perspective of what the Israelis were telling them and the desperation that the Israelis were feeling. They didn't have a broader picture.

Q: Was Nick Veliotos very much in charge?

ABINGTON: Nick was really in charge. Keating was the nominal ambassador, but it was Veliotos who was running the whole show. He was working tremendously hard. He was in touch with the foreign minister, the prime minister, the defense minister. He was forwarding proposals and suggestions to Washington, giving assessments. He was pulling it all together and coordinating the whole thing. He was doing this while trying to keep Keating happy and not have Keating go off the deep end either.

Q: Were you able to go out and meet your various contacts during this time?

ABINGTON: There was massive mobilization. You'd just see it walking down the street: the absence of men. The people on the street by and large were either elderly men or schoolboys or women. You did not see men. It was difficult in the sense of contacts were gone if they were journalists, they were at the front. Your normal contacts just weren't there.

Q: Coming back to the Americans, as an old consular hand myself, I would have thought that you would have had a bunch of people saying, "You've got to do something" no matter how unrealistic it was to get them out. If they're frightened or annoyed, there is no place better than the embassy to go and shout at officials.

ABINGTON: Of course, I wasn't in the consular section. I was in the political section. But my recollection is that there really was not during the conflict a lot of public pressure from people to try to get out. People were listening to radio on an hourly basis. They generally understood what the situation was. They knew that airplanes were not flying in, that getting out was almost impossible. I don't think you had the kind of pressure in 1973 that you had during the 1990-1991 Gulf War.

Q: There you had a not very impressive reaction on the part of many people who were Jewish-Americans.

ABINGTON: The difference in '90-'91 was that you had SCUD missiles hitting Tel Aviv and civilian casualties. In the '73 war, I don't think that there were any civilian casualties as a result of Syrian or Egyptian military strikes. You also had the threat of chemical warheads in '90-'91 and that created a tremendous amount of panic and concern on the part of the population.

Q: After a cease-fire came into existence, what were we seeing in Israel?

ABINGTON: One has to recall that the cease-fire came about as a result of Kissinger's negotiations with the Soviets. Kissinger went to Moscow and worked out the details of a cease-fire acceptable to both sides and a Security Council resolution, 338, which called for a cease-fire and for a political settlement. The Israelis' feeling was mixed. On the one hand, they had really been bloodied very badly with very serious casualties, the worst since 1948 when Israel became independent, the worst casualties of any conflict, and they had been badly damaged by the Egyptians and the Syrians both in terms of people killed and wounded as well as equipment destroyed. On the other hand, I think that the Israelis at this point had really put the Egyptians under tremendous pressure. Some elements of the IDF and the political establishment thought that Israel should continue fighting against Egypt to destroy the Egyptian Third Army and to push the Egyptians out of the Bar Lev Line and out of the Sinai. But then this became wrapped up in power politics and in Cold War politics. The Soviet Union made it clear that an Israeli military move against Egyptian forces along the lines I just described would meet some unspecified Soviet response. This led to a tremendous amount of international tension. It caused President Nixon to increase the overall readiness of U.S. military forces around the world to a much higher stage. And it raised concern that the conflict, particularly the Egyptian-Israeli conflict, could lead to U.S.-Soviet military involvement. As a result, the stakes increased tremendously. Because of that, Kissinger and Nixon made it quite clear to the Israeli leadership that there had to be a cease-fire. There were assurances from Kissinger that the U.S. would be very mindful of Israeli security requirements and concerns. I think that that had been clearly demonstrated by the support both political and military that the U.S. had given Israel with the outbreak of the conflict. There was a clear commitment that there would be additional U.S. military assistance to Israel and there would be an expedited resupply of military equipment to make up for the losses that the Israelis had suffered. So, Israel accepted the cease-fire somewhat but not too reluctantly. Kissinger flew from Moscow to Tel Aviv and it was a six to eight-hour stop to brief the Israelis. Then he went on to Cairo to meet with President Sadat and to brief him as well. That was the 22nd or 23rd of October. The fighting stopped, although there were sporadic outbreaks, particularly in the Sinai or in Egypt proper across the canal, where there continued to be periodic low level fighting. The Egyptian Third Army, which at that point had been totally surrounded? The Israelis kept up their military pressure and this continued to be a real flashpoint. The United States had to work out resupply arrangements and put some serious pressure on the Israelis to allow food and fuel and so forth to go to the Egyptian Third Army. Sadat was absolutely concerned that the Israelis would try to destroy the Third Army. He was appealing for Soviet and American help to keep that from happening. Kissinger and others realized the seriousness of that situation and pressed Israel very hard not to take further action against the Third Army.

Q: During the war, were you monitoring the Arabs within Israel and those in the West Bank? Was there concern on the part of the Israelis that they would rise up to support their fellow Arabs?

ABINGTON: Not really. We didn't spend any time at all? Of course, the consulate in Jerusalem had responsibility for reporting on what Palestinians in the West Bank were doing. But we essentially did nothing with regard to the Israeli Arabs or for that matter Palestinians in Gaza. I think that the main reason was that unlike in the Gulf War and unlike today, Palestinians were not politically mobilized and were not politically active in 1973. They were quiescent and the Israelis had the situation under control militarily with regard to the West Bank and Gaza. I don't recall that there were any particular incidents caused by Palestinians nor were there Israeli measures like 24-hour curfews as they did during the Gulf War. The Palestinians were not a factor in the '73 war.

Q: The war was over. What were you getting from your contacts? Was there a change in the American-Israeli equation?

ABINGTON: Yes. There was a feeling on the part of Israelis that the United States had played a critical role in standing by Israel during its most difficult hour since independence. There was a sense of real gratitude on a popular level and among the political leadership. On the other hand, Golda Meir was still the prime minister. You had people in the cabinet who were determined that they were going to do it their way. Kissinger was finding the Israelis difficult to deal with, as they usually are because they are very fierce in terms of protecting their own interests. There was a cease-fire but then there was a very intensive period of negotiation to stabilize the situation. Those were the negotiations in November and December which led to the two agreements. The first was the Kilometer 101 Agreement. Then there was the First Disengagement Agreement. Kissinger started and the phrase was coined "shuttle diplomacy" between Israel and Egypt in November and December to try to stabilize the situation to remove this flashpoint of the Israeli siege of the Egyptian Third Army. That led to the Kilometer 101 Agreement.

Q: What were you doing in November and December?

ABINGTON: Fairly intensive discussions were going on between Kissinger and Rabin here in Washington. The embassy was receiving instructions from Washington to talk to the foreign ministry or to the prime minister. Keating and Veliotos would do that. For example, there were warnings about military action against the Third Army. There was consultation primarily led by Veliotos to talk to senior Israeli leaders to get their sense of their mood, of their plans, etc. In that sense, it was still a crisis atmosphere. The embassy was doing its best to assess Israeli plans and intentions regarding the aftermath of the war and how to deal with it. There was also a congressional visit, a large one led by Congressman Mel Pryce and 40-45 members of Congress who came out shortly after the cease-fire. Congressman Pryce was chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. There were also representatives from the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The Israelis then as now realized the importance of congressional support for Israel. They worked really hard to take care of this delegation. I was the control officer along with one of the military attaches. It was quite dramatic because this probably would have been early November and the Israelis flew us by helicopter out to the Sinai along the Suez Canal. We saw the area of the Chinese Farm where this huge battle had taken place and you literally could see hundreds of destroyed and damaged tanks and APCs in this area. We flew over the Suez Canal and went to Egypt to the Israeli forward positions where they had surrounded the Egyptian Third Army. We received a briefing from the IDF on the Egyptian side of the canal. I'll never forget, there were Egyptian soldiers' bodies still unburied. It was very much a war zone. It made a tremendous impact on the members of the congressional delegation and on me. We were the first visitors of a non-military nature to that area. The Israelis really played up what had happened, the threat, etc. It had the desired impact. The delegation went back to Washington and were very strongly behind a significant U.S. military assistance package to Israel. That was a very important event. It cemented congressional support for the Israelis. The Israelis received them at the highest level. They had briefings by the prime minister, the foreign minister, the IDF chief of staff and general command, and they saw for themselves the battlefield which made a very deep impression on these congressmen.

Q: During this early cease-fire period, were you picking up a certain disquiet on the part of elements within Israel of the leadership of Golda Meir?

ABINGTON: Very much so, yes. The Israeli press traditionally has been vociferous in its criticism. There was a feeling that the Israeli political and military leadership had failed the country by not anticipating the attacks and by misreading the intelligence and by a miss-assessment of Egyptian and Syrian political and military intentions. There was a committee formed, the Argonaut Committee, headed by the chief justice of Israel, which did a very thorough review of the situation and essentially blamed the leadership for its failure. That led in early 1974 to Golda Meir's resignation. Yitzhak Rabin then became the prime minister. During that period- November, December, January-ongoing negotiations continued, which had to be done by Kissinger and his Middle East team that included Joe Sisco, who at the time had become US for Political Affairs, Roy Atherton, who was the Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Hal Saunders, who was the deputy; he had moved over from the NSC to assist Roy Atherton with responsibility for the Arab-Israeli issue, and Bill Klunt had replaced him at the NSC. So, you had some real heavy hitters. Kissinger had a superb team of diplomats and negotiators with him, although he really ran the show. But it was personal hands-on diplomacy by Kissinger negotiating between the Egyptians and the Israelis to bring about the Kilometer 101 Agreement, which stabilized the situation and led to the Israeli evacuation of positions across the canal, and then later the First Disengagement Agreement which led to a zone of separation between Israel and Egypt. During that period, the embassy was totally involved in supporting Kissinger. Essentially the embassy moved up to Jerusalem to the King David Hotel and we were there in a staff and administrative support capacity, although Veliotis was involved, Keating was really no more than the symbolic presence. It was really a negotiation totally run by Henry Kissinger and by his staff in Washington. The embassy played very little substantive role in this process. It essentially was there to support Kissinger's efforts.

Q: When did you leave Israel?

ABINGTON: I left Israel in June of 1975. During that period, the negotiation by Kissinger was intensive. To my way of thinking, the '73 war and Kissinger's diplomacy afterwards laid the foundation for American diplomacy to try to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute. I look upon the peace process and building blocks. Every agreement is based upon prior agreements. Kissinger really set that in motion. During the time that I was there in Tel Aviv, there was the Kilometer 101 Agreement, there was the First Disengagement Agreement, there was the 1974 Israeli-Syrian Disengagement Agreement, where Kissinger spent something like 33 days at the King David Hotel shuttling back and forth between Damascus and Jerusalem to negotiate that agreement. Then there was the attempt to reach a second disengagement agreement which failed in March of 1975. I remember being at the airport and Kissinger saying that he was going back for a reassessment of American policy which was widely perceived in Israel and in Washington as a threat to bring pressure against Israel, feeling that Israel was being recalcitrant in terms of a further pullback in the Sinai. Of course, the Israelis mounted a very effective congressional campaign which culminated in a letter to the President by something like 90-92 of the 100 senators saying that the United States should not put pressure on Israel. That whole reassessment threat pretty much went out the window. But it was a period of very creative diplomacy by Kissinger and deep personal involvement on the Arab-Israeli issue and really laid the groundwork for future U.S. efforts to mediate the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Q: One of the attributes of Israeli action that I've picked up is that they would sign an agreement and then keep challenging it. In other words, an agreement is sort of a preliminary thing and they keep pushing ahead a little. Were we noticing that, trying to get everything they could out of it?

ABINGTON: I've always felt that a style of Israeli negotiators is to stake out an absolutely unreasonable and maximalist position and to negotiate back from there. In general, Israelis are reasonably successful in that because they end up getting more than might otherwise be the case. This tends to be a tactic whether it's negotiating with Arab neighbors or with the Palestinians or whether it's negotiating with the United States issues in the bilateral relationship like strategic cooperation, etc. It's a characteristic of negotiations, to overreach, to put really maximalist positions on the table, and they end up getting instead of 70% maybe 90-95%. I helped do the staff work for Kissinger when he was negotiating these agreements, working with the Executive Secretariat. I saw the negotiating papers and so forth. I saw the agreements as they went through drafts. Then when I came back to Washington in the summer of '75, I was a staff aide to Roy Atherton. I did a lot of the staff work in preparation for negotiations that Kissinger carried out. He kept it to a very small circle of people and someone needed to do the staff work and it fell to me as Roy's staff aide. To go back to your question, once an agreement was reached between Israel and Syria, between Israel and Egypt, and once the military movements took place, Israel was pretty good about living up to the agreements. Once the Israelis pulled back to new lines in Sinai, they basically respected those. In the Golan Heights, when Israel withdrew from Kuneitra, quite clearly the Israelis destroyed Kuneitra before they withdrew. It was widely seen as an act of bad faith. Then the Israelis charged that the Syrians were not interested in peace because otherwise they would have rebuilt Kuneitra even though it was surrounded by the Israelis. It's still surrounded by the Israelis 26 years after the disengagement agreement. It angered the Syrians very much. The Israelis charged that the buildings had been damaged or destroyed during fighting. In fact, we went up and examined the area, and it was clear that the Israelis had put charges in the buildings and collapsed them, blown out the walls so that the roofs caved in. That was not caused by fighting during the war but caused by an act of Israeli retaliation.

Q: You can tell. I was in Bosnia after the civil war and you can tell when houses are destroyed by military action.

ABINGTON: Yes. It was quite clear that Israel had destroyed much of the city of Kuneitra. This has been a hallmark of the way Israel negotiates agreements with its neighbors. They are niggardly in the negotiations. There is no good grace on the part of the Israelis when they carry out these agreements. That was the case with the disengagement agreement. There was no good grace in terms of Kuneitra. They destroyed the city and poisoned the atmosphere, which was bad to begin with. It certainly didn't set a proper framework for a future developing relationship.

It was the same thing when they carried out the peace agreement with Egypt. Rather than just withdraw from Israeli settlements in the Sinai, which clearly were illegal, the Israelis evacuated the settlements with difficulty, but then they flattened and destroyed the settlements. It was widely seen in the Arab world as a general attitude of Israel towards Arabs. Of course, they held on to the Taba area for years when clearly there was no legal basis for their having it. It's these kind of gestures on the part of Israel that goes a long way to poisoning the atmosphere between Israel and its neighbors. It's always an irony that when Israel talks about a cold peace, it always fails to acknowledge actions that it has taken that have contributed to the cold peace.

Q: Did you sense any change in the attitude towards Syria or Egypt or towards Arabs in general?

ABINGTON: Certainly not up to the point that I left in 1975. There was a visceral hatred or dislike of, particularly, the Syrians. There was a feeling that the Syrians were the most brutal of all the Arabs. I suppose that one reason was that the Syrians and the Israelis geographically were cheek by jowl unlike the Egyptians and the Israelis where you had the Sinai as a buffer. In that sense, having that kind of buffer meant that the hatred or the mistrust on the part of Israelis was much less. I think that in general among Israelis that I talked to, average Israelis, there was a general contempt and mistrust with regard to Arabs in general, a visceral dislike of the Syrians, almost bordering on hatred, a deep distrust of Palestinians. This was reinforced by terrorist incidents, for example, the Ma'alot incident in '74.

Q: What was that?

ABINGTON: Some Palestinians came across the Israeli-Lebanese border. They seized a school in the town of Ma'alot in northern Israel. Israelis stormed the school and in the resulting fighting something like 20 Israeli schoolchildren were killed. Of course, that made a tremendous impact on Israelis. It happened when Kissinger was in Jerusalem and it totally disrupted the negotiations. There was an intense Israeli focus on this from the political leadership on down.

Q: Did you sense a change in our embassy towards the leadership of Sadat? Was he a different person than had been felt before? We were thinking of Sadat as being not a very impressive replacement for Nasser.

ABINGTON: It changed as a result of the '73 war. It started to gradually change as Kissinger became convinced that Sadat was a genuinely different kind of Arab leader and that Sadat genuinely wanted to make peace. I can recall that Israelis were traumatized by the '73 war. To a degree they had blinders on because of their stereotypical attitudes towards Arabs that exist today. Of course, one fallout from the '73 war and the Israeli intelligence failure, military failure, and political failure was that it changed the psychology of the way that the military, the intelligence communities assessed Arab attitudes. They went very much from an arrogant feeling of Israel being so much stronger than the Arabs to really worst case assessments of Arab intentions. This worst case assessment led them to question and discount signs of a different Arab attitude towards peace with Israel. Certainly that was the case with Syria and Egypt. They listened to what Kissinger was saying, that this was a new ballgame and new opportunities were there. They had been burned so badly by the '73 war that they were very skeptical about what they were told by the Americans and they had a real difficulty in coming up with honest and accurate intelligence assessments of particularly Egyptian intentions. There was no Israeli interests section or embassy in Cairo. They had a very hard time gathering information. I've always felt that Israel suffers and continues to suffer in terms of its understanding of Arabs and its assessment of Arab intentions. That's been the case in the 30 years that I dealt with Israel and Arabs.

Q: You keep using the term "Arab." Was there the feeling that the Egyptians aren't really Arabs?

ABINGTON: Oh, yes. I'm using "Arab" in a broad sense without distinguishing between Jordanians, Syrians, Iraqis, Egyptians. There was certainly the growing perception in the embassy that the Egyptians were quite different. We could see signs of falling out between the Egyptians and the Syrians over how Sadat was pursuing his policy. The Syrians were angry that the unity of the war after the conflict ended, that the Egyptians began pursuing their own interests in terms of negotiations with Israel using the United States. You could see developing Syrian-Egyptian strains. King Hussein at the time had stayed out of the '73 war. There were continuing secret Israeli-Jordanian contacts and dialogue going on with Hussein and the Israeli prime minister at the intelligence level. In '73 and '74, the PLO had been kicked out of Jordan.

Q: That was Black September.

ABINGTON: Yes. They had relocated in Lebanon, which was becoming increasingly unstable in the mid-'70s. In late '75/'76, Lebanon became a real hotspot. I think that there was a perception in the embassy that Egypt was playing a different role and the U.S. leadership - Kissinger, Nixon, and then Forwere looking at Egypt in a much different light.

Q: Here is the embassy. You've been through a very dramatic war. Did you find that all of you coming out of that were much more pro-Israeli? I'm talking about real localitis coming out.

ABINGTON: No. I think there were different opinions. To be perfectly honest, I felt from the time I arrived in Israel in 1972 that Israel was essentially racist in the way that it treated Palestinians. I was new to the Foreign Service, but just from the point of view of seeing how Israel dealt with its Arab neighbors, I felt that Israeli policies were misguided, not very well thought out, that the Israeli prejudices against the Arabs were so deep and so strong that Israeli actions were fueling the crisis. Certainly one can fault what the Palestinians were doing, can fault what the Syrians were doing, a lack of recognition or understanding of what the Egyptians were up to, but Israeli actions created a lot of the difficulties in the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is a conflict between two parties. When you're part of that and when you're emotionally bound up in it, it's very difficult to distance yourself and take an honest look. I think that it's the role of outside mediators like the U.S. to rise above the positions of one side or the other and try to bring them together. We've done not so good and fairly good jobs of that at different times. We can talk about when we didn't do a very good job.

Q: We'll come to that. We'll pick this up in 1975 when you're going back to Washington.

Today is June 8, 2001. This was 1975. How did you get the job?

ABINGTON: The assistant to Roy Atherton had been Ed Walker, with whom I had served in Tel Aviv for one year and then went back and worked for Roy and then later became Assistant Secretary for the Near East Bureau. Ed Walker recommended to Roy that I replace him. I came back in the summer of 1975 and started working for Roy as a staff aide. In those days, the way that Henry Kissinger ran the Middle East negotiations basically there was a very small group of people around Kissinger, including Joe Sisco, Roy Atherton, Hal Saunders, Pete Day, Bob Oakley over at the NSC. Kissinger relied on those people. He tried to keep the negotiations very tightly compartmented. In essence, I became sort of a staff person for the peace process particularly doing special projects for Atherton and Hal Saunders. When I came back, it was shortly after Kissinger's efforts in April of '75 to negotiate a second Sinai withdrawal agreement had failed and Kissinger had threatened a reassessment of U.S. policy which the Israeli lobby and Israel quickly scuttled. That reassessment was dead in the water. Kissinger redoubled his efforts with President Sadat and with then Prime Minister Rabin to try to work out a second Sinai agreement. During that period when I came back, it was a very intensive period of preparation of maps and discussions in Washington with the Israelis by Kissinger and then culminating in another shuttle out to the region and eventually a second agreement which had the Israelis withdraw much further into the Sinai. It set the stage later on for the Camp David negotiations in the Carter administration of 1978.

Q: How were you used?

ABINGTON: Roy really gave a lot of authority to the staff aides and it was an enormously demanding job. I did it for two years, an incredibly long period of time. We would either come in at 6:30 or 7:00 AM and stay until 4:00 or 5:00 PM or we'd come in around 9:00 AM and stay until 9:00 or 10:00 PM and work every other weekend. There were so many things going on during that period. Not only were there the Israeli-Arab negotiations on the peace process that Kissinger was conducting, but there were things like the crisis in Lebanon, the assassination of Frank Meloy, the ambassador there. Not too long after I arrived in the summer of 1975, the fighting between Lebanese and Palestinians became more and more intense. Towards the end of the summer/early fall, there was the evacuation of the FSI language school in Beirut and relocation of the school to Tunis. There was the drawdown of personnel at the embassy in Lebanon. I acted as Roy's factotum in terms of keeping track of what was going on, deciding what he needed to be alerted on and what he needed to work on. I worked with Pete Day and then later Hal Saunders very closely on these issues. There was just an enormous amount of paper that was prepared particularly for the first year of the Middle East negotiations. I was responsible for compiling the written history of these negotiations. Every time Kissinger would go anywhere, to China or to Europe, he would always take someone with him Roy Atherton or Sisco or Hal Saunderto staff him on the Middle East. It always takes someone very senior to staff him on the Middle East. We used to have these incredible number of suitcases which contained all the documentation, all of the previously negotiated agreements, not only the text of the agreements but all the side documents, the side letters of understanding, memoranda of agreement and so forth. Not only that, I would compile three- ring binders of all the conversations that Kissinger had and our ambassadors in the region had and cables that acted as backup. I can remember when Roy or Sisco would travel, they might have 20-25 of these bags of documents. It was just the way Kissinger did business. He wanted the documentation there that he could refer to. The people traveling with him wanted the documentation. It was an incredible job to try to keep up with all of this material plus all of the other things that the NE Bureau was dealing with. In terms of managing the paper flow, of building this library of documents on the peace process, it was a very intensive job with lots and lots of long hours. I probably saw more of Roy Atherton during that two- year period than any other person in my life.

Q: I would think one of the problems with this documentation is that Henry Kissinger had the reputation of going in on a one-on-one conversation, excluding other people. One was always concerned about promises made and all that. Was this true?

ABINGTON: Kissinger generally debriefed people after he had these meetings. Being a political scientist/historian, he was definitely looking to the future when he was no longer Secretary of State and would be writing about that period, a very dynamic period in American foreign policy. He would generally debrief people, such as Peter Rodman or other people would make notes of his meetings and then write them up. It was the same with telephone calls. At that point, whenever Henry Kissinger had a telephone conversation with a foreign official, generally there would be three or four people listening in on the line. The person on the other end was never told that anyone was listening in.

Q: This was common practice throughout the State Department, wasn't it?

ABINGTON: Yes, very much so. The practice changed later on when privacy concerns became more to the front. But during these phone conversations, Kissinger would insist on a verbatim memorandum of conversation. You usually had a secretary listening to the conversation, recording it in shorthand, and then the memorandum of conversation would be typed up and given very limited distribution. Kissinger wanted them immediately. That became the top priority of whoever was listening in.

Q: For the record, many of these things staff assistants at the State Department at the upper levels would be taking notes of things to do so that the principal person talking?

ABINGTON: In all the years I spent at the State Department, I felt that the State Department performed at the highest peak when Kissinger was Secretary of State. He demanded a lot from the State Department staff. He didn't tolerate sloppy work and he would be brutal if you sent a memorandum to him that was not well thought out and succinche would come back with very acerbic comments. I was a task master for the NEA bureau. I would read memorandum and would rather rudely edit them myself and send them back to the drafters, which most staff aides didn't have that kind of authority, but Atherton wanted me to do it because he felt that Kissinger looked very carefully at things coming out of the NEA bureau and he wanted good work to go upstairs.

The way the Department worked during that period also was that Kissinger and Sisco wanted to bypass the system and the bureaucracy altogether. The number of memoranda going to Kissinger that were "out of the system" was very high. What that meant was that Kissinger, when he wanted something, he wanted it five minutes ago. Or he considered it to be very sensitive and he felt that he didn't want the line officers and the staff secretariat going over the memos or he didn't want to take the time to have them staffed. With the Near East Bureau, it was a very unique relationship with Kissinger's office and with US for Political Affairs Joe Sisco. Many of the memos that we did on the peace process would go directly to Sisco, who would walk them into Kissinger, or would go directly to Kissinger and they wouldn't even be put in the system. Eventually copies of the memoranda made their way into the archives of the State Department, but there was an awful lot of material that did not go through the formal system through the staff secretariat on the problems facing the Middle East Bureau, it looks like it was divided up into the peace process, which is essentially Egypt and Israel, and then the Lebanese thing with the Palestinians. The Palestinians were part of the Lebanese problem as opposed to the Israeli problem at that time. Am I wrong?

During the Kissinger negotiations, we tried to get at the Palestinian problem through negotiation with Jordan. We started talking about things like functional autonomy for the Palestinians. In other words, they would run civic affairs but the Israelis would still be occupying the area but with less of a direct control over the daily life of Palestinians. There were some attempts to try to get those negotiations off the ground between Jordan and Israel but the issues were complex, very difficult, and quickly fell to the wayside as Kissinger really concentrated on things like the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement or the Egyptian-Israeli negotiation or when the crisis in Lebanon became increasingly serious in '75/'76. We tried to deal with the Lebanon crisis in a way to keep Syria and Israel from being sucked into a war over Lebanon. The Palestinian issue was really secondary and to the extent that it was addressed, particularly in late '75/'76, it was a function of the increasingly serious fighting in Lebanon.

Q: Did the question of Israeli settlements in the West Bank come up then?

ABINGTON: Yes, it was an issue. Of course, it was a Labor government. The defense minister and later foreign minister, Yigal Allon, put forward a plan to establish Israeli settlements in areas that were considered important for Israel's security, the Jordan Valley and the West Bank ridge line that would be to the west of the Jordan Valley. He established a string of settlements and built north-south highways in that area. The Arabs protested this and would take it to the UN. At the time, the United States took a pretty firm line in the Security Council against Israeli settlements and generally voted for resolutions that condemned the settlements and called on Israel to cease seizing land and building settlements and transferring population into Palestinian areas. That included in East Jerusalem as well. But while the settlement issue was a subject of dialogue with Israel it never became the central issue.

One has to keep in mind that at the time we were talking not only about settlements in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, but also there was a very active building of settlements up in the Golan Heights. The Israelis basically razed the Syrian villages that were up there, bulldozed the villages, bulldozed the walls marking off Syrian fields and so forth, and created an uninterrupted area up in the Golan Heights that was open to Israeli settlements. But more importantly from the point of view of Kissinger at the time were Israeli settlement activity in the Sinai. Kissinger even before Camp David understood that an Egyptian-Israeli peace had to entail full Israeli withdrawal from Sinai and that meant that Israel would have to give up all of the settlements that it had been establishing since 1967 in the Sinai. So, the settlement issue was an important issue and it had a lot of different ramifications, but probably the focus in '75/'76 was thinking about how settlements affected the ongoing Israeli-Egyptian negotiating process, and it was less of a focus on the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza, although that was important within an inter-Arab context.

Q: As you were watching this, did you get any feel about the difference in negotiating style or outlook between the Egyptians and the Israelis and then also with the Syrians?

ABINGTON: Negotiations with the Syrians in terms of Israeli-Syrian negotiations pretty much petered out after the 1974 disengagement agreement on the Golan Heights. Increasingly that process in terms of trying to consider or try to work towards an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement was overtaken by the mounting crisis in Lebanon. Syria was faced with a situation of enormous complexity which threatened to suck Syria and Israel into an all-out war. U.S. efforts at the time were focused on trying to reach a series of understandings, informal understandings, of red lines between Syria and Israel so that each understood what each party could or could not do in Lebanon. Those red lines were designed to keep Israel and Syria from going to war over Lebanon. In terms of negotiating style between Israel and Egypt, President Sadat had a very clear vision of where he wanted to go and he was less interested in the actual details of negotiation than getting to the end result. The Israelis on the other hand I've seen this throughout they did it with the Lebanese in 1982, they might concede certain broad principles but then the Israelis would win back whatever concessions they've made through nickeling and diming every single detail. The Israeli negotiating style with the Arabs is such that they focus on the details so much, they take away the good feeling that comes from an agreement by making their negotiating partner feel that there is no such thing as a goodwill gesture on the part of the Israelis. They insist on nailing down all of their concerns in writing and the Israeli style is very much to look at the details, to have lawyers draft the details, and the Arabs by comparison the way they negotiate, I think that they were at a disadvantage in drafting the text of agreements. The net effect of these agreements was that the Arabs felt that the Israelis got too much and instead of becoming a win-win situation people who negotiated with the Israelis have a pretty bitter taste in their mouth at the end of the process. Whatever goodwill was there tended to be dissipated as the difficulties of implementing the agreements became apparent.

Q: In the Near Eastern Bureau, you move over to the Tigris, Euphrates, Syria, Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and then beyond, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and all. Did that get pretty short shrift in those days?

ABINGTON: Very much so. Roy Atherton spent hardly any time at all on South Asian issues or for that matter even looking at the Gulf, at Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan. That was backwater of the Near East and South Asia Bureau. At the time, you had a Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Asia. That person had a tremendous amount of latitude in terms of dealing with those issues and would spend most of his time dealing with South Asia and Iran. At the time, Sid Sober was the PDAS in NEA. He had a South Asian background. Between him and the Deputy Assistant Secretary, Howie Schaffer, you had a pretty strong team who were dealing with South Asia. The people in the Near East Bureau were just going flat out all the time. There were all these task forces going on whether it was over terrorism, hijackings, or the civil war in Lebanon, or the crisis in South Asia which led to an Indo-Pakistani War, and Kissinger's preoccupation with Israeli-Arab negotiations on the peace process. It was a time when I wonder how the NEA bureau managed to stay on top of everything. There were so many crises going on all the time.

Q: One had the feeling that Iran, being the Shah, was taken care of give him what he wants and we'll get some money back from him. And with India it was sort of back of the hand. The relationship with the Indian leader was very poor.

ABINGTON: That's true. In Pakistan, the Pakistanis acted as the facilitator for Kissinger's famous secret trip to China. He went to China from Pakistan. He ostensibly was on a visit there. But as I look back during that period, certainly the Israeli-Arab negotiations seemed to be the top priority, but then they would get pushed aside as crises arose like Lebanon or India-Pakistan.

Q: On the Lebanese thing, you had a tribal conflict within Lebanon itself. Was there much we could do about that?

ABINGTON: The actual fighting there was relatively little. Our embassy in West Beirut was in the middle of a free fire zone. We had drawn down to a relatively few number of people. The fighting was so intense that no one could get out and go talk, particularly to the Christian side. During that period in early '76, Frank Meloy, the ambassador, and the economic counselor had gone out to try to go into East Beirut to try to meet with the Christians. They disappeared and the embassy called in and said they were missing. There was a period of time? Everyone was deeply concerned. I informed Roy Atherton and he in turn informed the Secretary. Then I got a telephone call from the Operations Center that said that the bodies of Meloy and Waring and the Lebanese driver, Magrabi, had been found. I went in and informed Roy. Of course, Roy was just devastated by the news. It was a real crisis in terms of trying to deal with the parties in Lebanon. We had no one who could get out and talk to them. Particularly after Meloy's assassination, the embassy basically was in a bunker. People were living in the embassy. They were raiding the commissary for their food. There were artillery duels back and forth outside and it was just an incredibly dangerous situation. It was at that point that Kissinger decided that we needed to send someone into East Beirut to talk to the Christians and figure out what they were up to. Initially, he picked Ed Djerejian to do this, or rather Ed volunteered to do it. Ed spoke fluent Arabic, excellent French. He is an Armenian-American and spoke Armenian. At the time, Ed was the U.S. Consul General in Bordeaux or Marseilles. He joined up with Kissinger on one of Kissinger's trips to Europe and flew back. I believe Roy was on the flight or Joe Sisco. Djerejian talked with Kissinger and mapped out what they were going to do, what he was going to do. They came back to Washington. Djerejian held briefings, met with a number of people, had his instructions. I remember helping him be fitted for a bulletproof vest. I went and got something like \$20-25,000 in hundred dollar bills for Ed for expenses. Ed took off with two or three security agents, flew back to Paris, went down to see his wife before he was supposed to go to Cyprus to catch a ferry from Cyprus to Beirut. All of a sudden, I got a phone call from the Operations Center which said that Djerejian had called in and his wife was ill or upset about his going and he had decided he couldn't go. The security agents were bringing back the \$25,000. Kissinger just went ballistic. He was so furious at Djerejian. He was determined to punish him. Ed was kind of exiled for a while to a pretty unimportant job in the European Bureau. He had a promotion rescinded by Kissinger. He overcame this. But Kissinger was absolutely furious over this. Roy Atherton and Joe Sisco protected Djerejian and shielded him from Kissinger's wrath. Kissinger had a famous temper.

As an aside, Sid Sober, the principal Deputy Assistant Secretary at the time, just rubbed Kissinger the wrong way. Kissinger ordered Atherton or Sisco to get rid of Sid Sober. Sid continued to be the PDAS but we went through elaborate steps to hide the fact from Kissinger that Sid Sober was the PDAS. He would not attend meetings with Kissinger. We would find someone else to go. If Roy was traveling and we had a memo for Kissinger, we put someone else's name down on the memo so that he didn't know that Sid Sober was there. It was a case where Kissinger would be furious at people but then the FS would protect those people.

But after Djerejian pulled out, David Mack, the office director for the Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, volunteered to go to Beirut along with Bob Hope, who at had been a DCM in Beirut and knew all the actors and was working in Personnel. It took tremendous courage. They went to Nicosia. They got on a ferry boat with a bodyguard or two. If the Christians in East Beirut weren't going to protect them, two bodyguards wouldn't have made the slightest bit of difference. But in an act of tremendous courage, they went to East Beirut, spent a week or two there talking to people and then calling in reports and then writing up the reports. That really gave us a window on the thinking. But our ability to influence either the Muslim or the Christian participants in the civil war in Lebanon was very limited. At the time, Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians had established a tremendous presence in West Beirut. We worked out through the CIA an informal arrangement with the PLO in terms of the PLO giving some protection to the embassy in Beirut to keep it from being attacked by Lebanese Muslim organizations. The CIA acted as the middleman in doing this. That started the contacts between the PLO and Yasser Arafat. It was in the context of Lebanon and the civil war there in the mid-'70s that we started dealing with them over issues like the security of the embassy in Beirut.

Q: This was at a time when contact with the PLO was strictly forbidden.

ABINGTON: Yes, it was. As part of the 1975 Sinai II disengagement agreement, the side MOU that Prime Minister Rabin insisted on having and we negotiated with the Israelis, one clause in that MOU was that the United States would refrain from any contact with the PLO unless and until the PLO renounced terrorism and recognized Israel's right to exist. I was told that Kissinger thought this was kind of a throwaway and felt that it would not be any particular constraint on American foreign policy in terms of dealing with this issue. In fact, the security channel became a conduit for discussion with the PLO on political issues as well, but it was carried out through the CIA, not by State Department officials. But as of the time of that MOU, contact with the PLO, which had been allowed before then and people in Beirut and Syria used to talk to Palestinians, after '75 overt contact ended.

Q: There is still a reflection of this as we speak today. The head of the CIA is going out to talk to both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

ABINGTON: That's a different story. We'll get to that later. That role really took place in 1997 when Israeli-Palestinian security contacts broke down and the CIA was asked by the Israeli Shin Bet to facilitate the reestablishment of Israeli-Palestinian security coordination. It's in that context that the CIA and George Tenet got sucked into this.

Q: We'll pick that up later on.

You were there from '75-'77?

ABINGTON: Yes.

Q: How did the transition when the Carter administration came in? Every time there is an election of a president, promises are made to get the Jewish vote, particularly about the embassy moving to Jerusalem. How did the actual transition work?

ABINGTON: About the time of the election, particularly as the campaign was going on, and I've seen this during other pre-election periods and afterwards, foreign policy issues all of a sudden took a backseat to everything else. At that point the objective was not to let any crises arise which could become an election issue. As we got into August and September of 1976, the amount of work decreased tremendously because people were focused on the conventions, on the campaigns, on the debates. Kissinger himself was much less active. When the election took place and Jimmy Carter won, we went from being tremendously busy to being tremendously not busy simply because everybody was checking in on him. The senior leadership in the State Department was basically wrapping things up. They were not taking any new initiatives or trying to conclude agreements. Of course, any time you have a transition, everybody is tasked to write transition papers for the issue that they're working. There was a tremendous number of papers written by the Near East Bureau during that period because there were so many active problems going on. The very interesting thing about that transition was that once Carter was sworn in and Vance became Secretary of State, Carter focused almost immediately like a laser on the Arab-Israeli situation. Almost from the time of the inauguration and Vance becoming Secretary of State, Roy Atherton stayed on as Assistant Secretary. The focus was on Arab-Israeli issues. The first three or four months of 1977 were extremely busy in terms of thinking through our Middle East policy, what we were trying to achieve, drafting a tremendous number of papers? If you draft a paper for the President from the Secretary of State for a visit or an issue, those papers are fairly short, not more than three or four pages. But we used to do 15-20 page papers for Carter on the Middle East issue, on the Arab-Israeli issue. The Carter administration started off with a focus on the Middle East. The very first trip that Cyrus Vance took abroad was to the Middle East. I organized the trip and put it together, worked out the schedule with Vance's people, worked out with Roy the tasking of all the papers and the preparation of all the trip books. And he went to Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, he may have had a brief stop in Lebanon. That trip then set the stage for visits to Washington of the leaders from Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia for meetings with President Carter. That in turn led to Carter's focus on the peace process and laid the groundwork for continuing Kissinger's efforts, particularly on the Egyptian-Israeli front, which culminated in 1978 in the Camp David agreement and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

Q: Going back to the Kissinger time, did President Ford have his hand in there or was it pretty much left in Kissinger's?

ABINGTON: It was very much Kissinger running the show. My recollection on the peace process, I really didn't see President Ford's hand at all.

Q: You left this job when?

ABINGTON: I left in July of 1977 to go to FSI, where I studied Arabic for two year, one year in Rosslyn, and then the second year at the Arabic language school in Tunis.

Q: How did you feel about becoming an Arab specialist at that time?

ABINGTON: At that point, I was really taken with the Arab-Israeli situation. I had worked on it for seven years, an intensive period starting with the hijackings in 1970 and the Jordan civil war, the various terrorist incidents in Israel when I was there, the 1973 war, then Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy. So, as a new FS officer, I really felt that I had been thrown into the maelstrom. I found it tremendously exciting and stimulating and if you worked those issues you really have the feeling that the top levels of the State Department and the White House were following them. You felt like you were involved in something that was important and where you could make a difference. So, I saw Arabic language training as sort of a ticket into continuing on this process. I thought at the time based on discussions with Ed Walker, who was working on the peace process and with Roy Atherton and so forth, that I didn't want to be the traditional Arabist. I wanted to be someone who specialized in Arab-Israeli issues. Although I never learned Hebrew, I never saw myself as a dyed in the wool Arabist, but really someone who was working in the Levant on the nexus of the peace process and Israel's relations with its neighbors.

Q: How did you find your classmates? Were you picking up things about the Arab world through the language and through the instructors?

ABINGTON: To a degree. In 1977, there were very few FS officers who signed up to take Arabic. After the breaking of relations with the United States by a number of Arab countries in '67, and it was only in the mid-'70s that relations were restored, so the assignment opportunities for people who spoke Arabic were pretty limited. As a result, not very many people of my generation signed up to take Arabic. When I started taking Arabic, there were maybe six people, but only three of us had signed up for the two-year program. There was concern about the viability of the language school in Tunis because there were so few people signed up for Arabic that FSI was considering closing down the school. They got around it because they took a number of military students who after doing one year of language at the Defense Language School in Monterey went for their second year in Tunis. They also picked up some people in the field who wanted to learn Arabic and had them do their first and second year of language training in Tunis. That's how they kept the school going. But at that point, hardly anybody was signing up for long-term Arabic language. People felt there was not a good career future as an Arabist.

Q: Who were some of the students who were with you?

ABINGTON: There was a guy named Steve Engleton, who served in Jordan and one or two other Arab countries but basically dropped out of NEA and focused on Europe and never went back. Then there was Dick McKee, a brilliant linguist. Dick was a South Asian specialist. I think he spoke Urdu and he learned Hindi and he knew Arabic and French and two or three other languages. But Dick had a couple of assignments in the Near East area but then he went back to South Asia and also to Turkey. I think I was the only one who really stuck with the Middle East.

Q: How did you find Tunis as a spot to put the language school? It had been moved by force majeure from Beirut, a delightful spot in the pre-trouble time.

ABINGTON: I thought Tunis was not a very good place for the language school. Shortly after I got there, I asked directions from a Tunisian policeman in Arabic. First he answered me in German. Then he answered me in French. Then he figured out I was an American so he answered me in English. I spoke to him in Arabic, which he seemed to understand. And he spoke to me in English. It was just not a very good environment for learning Arabic. Most Tunisians spoke French. The North African dialect I found hard to understand. The school would have been much better located in someplace like Jordan or Syria, where you have an Arabic dialect that is more widely understood than the North African dialect.

Q: This was around '79.

ABINGTON: Yes, 1979.

Q: Whither?

ABINGTON: I got on a plane which had a stop in Tripoli, Libya. At that point we didn't have diplomatic relations with Libya. I flew on to Damascus. I was assigned to the embassy in Damascus. I replaced my friend Ed Walker as head of the political section in Damascus and was there from 1979 until 1982.

Q: What was the state of relations in that period between Syria and the United States?

ABINGTON: The Assad regime was a very secretive regime. We opened the embassy in Damascus after the 1974 Israel-Syria disengagement agreement which had been brokered by Henry Kissinger. The Syrian regime was very heavily dependent upon the Soviet Union for economic assistance and especially for military assistance. The Soviets were the principal supplier of military equipment to the Syrians. There was a very large Soviet presence in Syria, Soviet military advisors there. The stated goal of President Assad was to achieve military parity with Israel. The relationship between Israel and Syria continued to be very tense. The Egyptian embassy was around the corner from the American Embassy. Syria had broken relations with Egypt over the Camp David summit and the Egyptian-Israeli agreement. The Egyptian Embassy had been broken into by a Syrian mob. Demonstrations like that in Syria only took place at the instigation of the Syrian government. The Egyptian Embassy was basically ransacked and was pretty much in ruin. That was a clear sign by President Assad that he disapproved of Sadat's policies. There was a lot of tension between the United States and the Syrian government because the U.S. government was trying to promote the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Of course, the majority of the Arab world had broken relations with Egypt, had expelled Egypt from the Arab League. The Arab League had moved from Cairo to Tunis. The United States was not only pushing the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement but the second part of that agreement, which was autonomy for the Palestinians and trying to promote those negotiations, which in fact started and were ongoing. The PLO at the time was headquartered in Beirut in '79 but there was a love-hate relationship between the PLO led by Yasser Arafat and President Assad. Assad felt that Syria was really the center of the Arab world, that it represented Arab nationalist aspirations. He very much tried to control the Palestinian issue in terms of not wanting a separate peace. He made threatening noises towards King Hussein when he thought that Hussein might be edging towards negotiations with Israel. There was a lot of tension between the United States and Syria during this period. The nature of the Syrian regime was such that it was a very secretive regime. We had relatively limited contacts with political figures in the regime. The ambassador would see Assad from time to time when there were visitors, the Secretary of State or congressional delegations. But in general, the American ambassador did not have access to President Assad for meetings or for appointments to discuss issues. The primary person that the ambassador dealt with was the Syrian Foreign Minister, Abdel Halim Khaddam, who is still a vice president in the Syrian regime even though Assad has died. We had very little official access to Syrian officials and to the Baath Party. They kept us at arm's length and when we did have discussions with them they were fairly pro forma, a very heavy dose of Syrian propaganda. It was quite difficult to figure out what was going on in Syria. Of course, there was the ongoing Lebanon problem. By that point, 1979, Syria had something like 30-35,000 troops in Lebanon. It controlled Beirut. It controlled the Bekaa Valley. In between the Syrian-controlled area and the Lebanese border was the PLO. Of course, there were clashes at the time. There were infiltration attempts by the PLO into Israel. There were exchanges of fire. There were Israeli incursions into southern Lebanon. But there was this understanding between Syria and Israel that even though Israel was going into Lebanon the area where it would operate ground forces would only be between the Lebanese-Israeli border and the Litani River. North of the Litani River were Syrian troops and Israel was careful not to go north of the Litani River and confront Syrian troops with ground operations. Israel was carrying on air raids against Palestinian targets in West Beirut. You had an incredibly unstable situation. And you had a relatively hostile Syrian regime. (end of tape)

You had an internal situation in Syria that was very complicated because the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni organization, was carrying out major attacks of terrorism and assassinations against the Alaoui Baathist regime of Syria. You had a break in relations between Syria and Iraq because of the rivalry between Hafez El-Assad and Saddam Hussein, two different factions of the Baath Party, each saying that they were the legitimate party, not recognizing the other. It was an incredibly complex mix of a lot of different issues and it was very difficult to figure out what was going on in Damascus because of the nature of this regime.

When I got to Damascus, there was the announcement that Syria and Iraq were going to unite. This had been spurred by the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. But within a matter of a couple of months, the whole process of discussing unification between Syria and Iraq broke down into tremendous acrimony which led eventually to a break in diplomatic relations between Syria and Iraq. It was during this period that the Muslim Brotherhood attacks against the Syrian regime started intensifying. There was intelligence and we knew that the Syrian government felt that the Muslim Brotherhood attacks were being assisted by the Iraqis in terms of providing explosives, arms, infiltrating people across the Iraqi-Syrian border. There also was some evidence that Muslim Brotherhood types in Saudi Arabia were sending money and providing guidance to people inside Syria. There was also a very deep-seated Syrian belief that the Jordanian government was allowing Muslim Brotherhood operatives safe haven in Amman and was allowing them to infiltrate across the border. When I first got there in '79 for the next year to year and a half there was a mounting internal crisis over this challenge to the Alaoui regime. This took the form of assassination of Alaoui political and military figures. The Muslim Brotherhood started assassinating Soviet military advisors and carrying out bombing attacks against Soviet military compounds and very brutal bombing attacks against Syrian government facilities as well. I think it's really interesting because these bombing attacks were as brutal as anything that's taken place in the Middle East in the last 20 years yet because of the secretive nature of the Syrian regime they tried to cover up the attacks. It was very difficult to get accurate information about who had been killed and so forth. In the summer of 1980, a suicide bomber drove a car to Syrian air force headquarters and the Syrian air force not only was a military arm but it was a military intelligence arm that Assad relied on very much. It was one of the predominant military intelligence units. And he was an air force officer himself. This car bomb killed around 50-60 people in the building. I can remember when the bomb went off, I was in the DCM's office and you could see the windows bulge from the concussion of the bomb. Fortunately, we had Mylar on the windows. Otherwise it would have blown the windows out. I remember going to the American school about a block away from air force headquarters. There was this huge explosion. The Syrians sealed the area off, would not let any foreigners in and were busy removing casualties. We heard through various sources that 50-70 people had been killed. Fortunately, the American community school had just been adjourned for summer vacation. There were a number of windows blown out in the school. I remember walking on the school grounds and finding a boot with a foot in it that had been blown a block or so away from the site of this explosion. These bombings were incredibly brutal.

Q: And it's something that hasn't raised much notice in the West.

ABINGTON: There was another bombing in '80 or '81 in downtown Damascus. A big car bomb went off and killed about 200 people. It took place at the height of the lunch hour rush time. Everyone would go home for lunch and take a nap in the afternoon and then resume work in the late afternoon. This very powerful bomb went off in a very busy part of Damascus. It was on a Sunday. It blew up about three or four buses packed with people. I saw the area. It literally took the sides of a couple of apartment buildings off. I don't think we ever knew how many people were killed by that. But we estimated that there were 200-300 deaths. It created a very dangerous and uncertain situation in Syria. It led to increasing tension between Syria and its Arab neighbors.

Q: I would have thought that the United States would be an obvious target since we were such a promoter of this peace. Of course, this was against Syria. It had nothing to do with the peace process.

ABINGTON: It had nothing to do with the peace process, but there were conversations with the Syrian Foreign Minister in which he voiced very strong suspicion that the U.S. was involved in the bombings, that the United States was giving through the CIA assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood. In that part of the world, there is a very deep feeling of the omnipotent power of the CIA and people are very wrapped up in conspiracies. Of course, the CIA had been involved in a lot of stuff in the region. One could understand why the Syrians were suspicious. On one occasion, the ambassador had been summoned by the foreign minister-

Q: Who was the ambassador?

ABINGTON: The first two years I was there, it was Talcott Seelye. Then from '81 to '82 it was Bob Paganelli. Seelye was summoned by Khaddam. I was head of the political section, so I always went along as notetaker and wrote all the cables. Khaddam produced a couple of walkie talkies made by Motorola and said that these walkie talkies had been recovered from the bodies of a couple of Muslim Brotherhood types and he cited this as proof that the United States was involved in aiding the Muslim Brotherhood. I remember Seelye denying it but said that he would send these walkie talkies back to Washington, the information on them and so forth, and we would try to get to the bottom of it. Of course, the Syrian suspicion was heightened because we had a ban on the export of any kind of sensitive equipment to Syria. I can recall that the Syrians had asked for Motorola walkie talkies that they wanted to use for the Syrian presidential guard. It was a major decision whether or not to approve the export license of these Motorola radios to the Syrians even though it was for presidential security. So, one can understand the suspicion of the Syrians. If they wanted these Motorola radios and we were making such a big deal out of it and at the same time they found these Motorola radios on the bodies of Muslim Brotherhood, they concluded that somehow the United States was involved.

Q: It was probably an off the shelf item.

ABINGTON: I think that's what it turned out to be, an off the shelf item that had been smuggled into Lebanon and used as communication devices for these Brotherhood types.

Q: The Hamas? That's when the real attack came on the Muslim Brotherhood. When did that happen? Could you explain what that was?

ABINGTON: Let me get there first. There was kind of a mounting crisis. In early 1981, there was serious concern after the Reagan administration had taken over that the Syrian government was about to invade Jordan. Relations between Assad and Hussein had deteriorated considerably over the course of the previous year because of a really deep-seated Syrian suspicion that somehow the Hashemite government was aiding the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, I suspected that they were aiding them as well. Jordanian intelligence is very good. There certainly was a pretty fair amount of evidence that senior Muslim Brotherhood people were headquartered in Amman, and I just cannot believe that the Jordanian intelligence didn't know they were there. Now, was Jordanian intelligence turning a blind eye or actively helping them? I don't know. But Assad made some very threatening military moves with armored divisions toward the Jordanian border. I can remember writing a telegram. We had been notified by the Near East Bureau that the Reagan administration was increasingly concerned about what was going on. I remember writing an analysis which we sent in very high precedent to Washington. I was told there was a National Security Council meeting going on and the analysis was that these were threatening moves by Assad to try to put pressure on Hussein because of his belief that the Jordanians were helping the Muslim Brotherhood but that Assad was a very cautious person and knew that if he were to actually make a threatening move against Jordan it would inevitably lead to an Israeli military action. At the time, Begin was the prime minister and Sharon was the defense minister. It was our assessment that Assad was not going to invade Jordan but was merely trying to carry on a war of nerves and threaten the Jordanians. But given his cautiousness he would not actually send troops into Jordan and reminding people that in 1970 it was Assad's predecessor who actually sent tanks across the border that led to the coup that brought Assad to power. This was very important because one of the options being looked at and being recommended by some of the ideologues in the State Department was that the U.S. should carry out air strikes against Syria not only to protect Jordan but indirectly to send a message to the Soviets that the United States would not tolerate Soviet surrogates, which Syrian was looked upon as, threatening America's friends in the region. It was people like Rick Burt and Paul Wolfowitz who were advocating the use of U.S. air strikes against Syria.

Q: This was very early in the Reagan administration when the anti-Soviet/anti-communist force was there, before reality began to dilute it.

ABINGTON: It was before reality started, but it could have been very dangerous. These people were really ideologues. You didn't have a very strong group of people in place at the time. Cap Weinberger was strong. But you had Dick Allen as the national security advisor. He was very weak. You had Al Haig as Secretary of State, who was kind of wacko. You had Rick Burt. You had Paul Wolfowitz. Real hardliners.

Q: Richard Perle was in there, too.

ABINGTON: Richard Perle was at the Defense Department. Today it's kind of hard to imagine that the Reagan administration seriously considered this option but they were looking at it. The cable that I did really helped convince people that it was not as big a crisis as it appeared.

Meanwhile, the Israelis were egging us on. The Israelis were providing us intelligence in their assessment that Syria was seriously considering invading Jordan. But Begin and Sharon had their own agenda. They wanted to whack the Syrians in order to get at the Palestinians. I saw this throughout the period. As I was reading the telegrams from the defense attaches in Tel Aviv and Ambassador Sam Lewis' talks with the Israelis, I felt that the Israelis were giving us a very one-sided, biased assessment of Syria and Syrian intentions and that they had their own agenda very much at work. But you see this frequently. Washington was predisposed to listen to the Israelis. Assad was viewed as hostile to American interests. He certainly had no defenders in Washington at the time, still doesn't. But this lack of understanding of what was really going on and the predilection to credit Israeli assessments much more than was warranted, that was 20 years ago and we still see it today.

Q: What happened after this crisis?

ABINGTON: We had an excellent military attaché who was on the road all the time. He was an Army lieutenant colonel. He was first rate, spoke Arabic very well. He must have worked 80 hours a week. He and his assistant attaché, an enlisted man, were on the road all the time checking out military deployments. He had a fantastic collection of the military flashes that are painted on the rear ends of vehicles so that you know what unit they are. His reporting was terrific in terms of tracking the movement of Syrian military units. He would be up in the middle of the night driving around, darting in and out of convoys. I really felt that the Israelis? His reporting was shared with the Israelis and the Israelis - I saw this on several occasions would say that they had an informant who alleged that the Syrians were doing a, b, and c. One specific incident had to do with the deployment of SCUD missiles. I know that we in the embassy in Damascus felt that this was a crock - the CIA station chief, the military attaché, myself because it didn't make sense what the Israelis were alleging in terms of deployment of SCUD missiles. This guy went out in the middle of the night at some danger to himself because Syrians were not friendly and he confirmed that and he was instructed to do so by Washington, by DII the SCUD missiles had not been deployed. It was our assessment that the Israelis were using these fabricated sources or maybe they were using signal intelligence and getting us to check it out. So, we were sort of playing their game. But after the initial deployment, through his checking out the situation on the ground? In fact, this was before satellite technology really developed to the point where we had real time intelligence from the satellites. The observation of military attaches was very important. This was true in Syria and it was certainly true in Israel. The Israelis were doing things and it was our military attaches who would see what was happening on the ground that gave us the heads up on various things. The Jordanian border calmed down, but these assassinations were still going on. It was during the spring or summer of 1981 that this section of Hamas, the old section of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, really rose up against the government forces in the area. Hafez El-Assad in consultation with the Alaoui military leader and the Alaoui were in all the key military positions, the intelligence units, the special forces, a group called the Defense Forces which was headed by Assad's brother and was deployed in the Damascus area to defend the Alaoui regime they decided that they had had enough of this uprising, of these assassinations. One has to keep in mind that it was very much targeted against Alaouis. There were many Alaoui officials who were assassinated because they were Alaoui. There had been these brutal car bombings. The government decided that it was going to crush the situation once and for all. Assad's brother, Rifaat El-Assad, deployed the Defense Forces equipped with T-72 tanks to Hamas, closed off the area, went in and just leveled this area where the Muslim Brotherhood was holed up. It was a civilian area. Basically, they shelled it and then they brought in bulldozers and just bulldozed the whole thing. No one knows how many people were killed. I know that it's become the common wisdom that 10,000 were killed. In fact, I don't think anyone really knows. But the Syrians sealed off the area. No one could get in or out for about a week until it was over. That really broke the back of the Muslim Brotherhood. There were assassinations, a few bombings, after that. In fact, once when I was going from where the embassy was to a meeting with some Australian colleagues in an area west of Beirut in a suburb called Mezzay, a bomb blew up about 50 yards from my car. It was incredibly frightening because it was a bomb on one of these three-wheel Suzuki vans. The Syrian security people immediately came out and started stopping cars. There was a car in front of me, a white Peugeot. There were three people in it. They panicked and they just were yelled at by the security people to stop. They kept going. This must have been 10-15 yards from me. The security people just opened up with AK-47s and killed all three people in the car. And they turned around and started pointing their guns at me. I was in a little Volkswagen Rabbit and stopped, held my hands in the air, and kept shouting in Arabic that I was a diplomat. They came over and looked at me and told me to get out of there. I haven't been frightened that much many times. You could see how this terrorism really had the regime on edge.

Q: Were you there when the Israelis invaded Lebanon?

ABINGTON: Yes.

Q: How did that go over?

ABINGTON: We could see the buildup. As we read the reporting from the embassy in Tel Aviv and what was in the Israeli press, particularly people like a very famous Israeli military analyst named Zeb Ship, who's been writing for 25 years, his analyses, obviously based on conversations with Sharon and the IDF, you could see the Israeli invasion coming. You could see that the Israelis were looking for an excuse to invade Lebanon and to take out the PLO. During the fall of '81 through the winter, you could see a steadily mounting pressure with more and more belligerent noises being made by Begin and particularly Sharon. It was very clear that Sharon was pushing the limits of the red lines. These informal understandings that the U.S. had helped negotiate, these understandings of what each side could and could not do. One red line was that the Israelis would not carry out air strikes against Syrian forces. The Israeli air force carried out attacks in late '81/early '82, hit targets in the Bekaa, and killed Syrian troops. This was viewed by the Syrians as the Israelis breaking one of the understandings that the United States had negotiated. I remember the Syrians came to us and said, "What are you going to do about this? You helped broker this. This is what the Israelis have done, violating the understanding." Of course, as usual when something like this happened, we sat on our hands and didn't do anything because the Israelis, particularly with someone like Sharon as defense minister, basically blew us off. This was a time when there was an increasingly acrimonious relationship between Sam Lewis and Sharon and to a degree Menachem Begin. Whenever he would go in and discuss things particularly on instructions to raise U.S. concerns, he would get reamed out by Begin or Sharon and on occasion they would go out and just publicly berate the United States for questioning Israeli motivation with Sam Lewis standing beside him. But the embassies in Tel Aviv and Damascus frankly got into a very acrimonious relationship in terms of our competing analyses of Israeli intentions. We both became very shrill in what we were saying to Washington, not very professional. We saw the worst in Israeli motives and we basically were right. The embassy in Tel Aviv was trying to defend what the Israelis were doing. We thought in Damascus they were looking the other way and not realizing that the Israelis were setting up a situation so they could invade Lebanon. But when the Israelis violated this understanding, the Syrian reaction, Assad's reaction, was to move SA-3 and SA-6 missiles into the Bekaa Valley in order to defend troops there. His rationale was, "If the Israelis do not abide by the understandings and the Americans don't do anything to reassure us that this won't happen again, we therefore have to take these steps to defend our troops in the Bekaa." That led to a crisis once the Syrians moved those missiles in. That upset the status quo. The Israelis looked upon that as a serious threat to their ability to fly over Lebanon and so forth. Of course, the Syrians said, "The Israelis have no right to fly over Lebanon. They have no right. They have attacked our troops. They are violating Lebanese air space. They violated an understanding against attacking Syrian troops. We have moved these missiles in to defend our troops." The United States embarked on and I think Phil Habib was the primary negotiator an effort to persuade the Syrians to withdraw their missiles that was not successful. So, you had this period of mounting tension in late '81 and the first half of '82 caused by these events, by continuing Palestinian PLO attacks against Israel, and it was a crisis that everyone could see coming. I remember sitting on my balcony of my apartment in Damascus, which overlooked Assad's house, early Sunday morning at about 7:00. I had my radio on and was listening to the BBC. The first story was that Palestinians had attempted to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London, Shlomo Argov, and had shot him, seriously wounding him in the head. He was in a coma and it was not known whether he was going to live or not. I listened to that and said, "The Israelis are going to invade Lebanon today." I called up the ambassador, Paganelli, and told him this. I said, "It's my belief that this is the excuse that Sharon's been looking for and that there will be an invasion." In fact, they did invade that day.

Q: Did the Syrians come to us during this invasion which led to the siege of Beirut? There was fighting with Syria, wasn't there?

ABINGTON: Yes, there was, but the Israeli and this is where Sharon was roundly condemned by the United States and in fact a commission of inquiry in Israel felt that Sharon had misled Begin and the Israeli cabinet as to what his intentions were. It was initially called the Peace for Galilee Campaign. Initially the stated intentions were to go up to the Litani River and clear out the Palestinian presence in southern Lebanon. People anticipated that there would be an Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon for some period of time in order to keep the PLO out. But at that point, people really did not know what Sharon's intentions were. Meanwhile, the Mossad and Sharon and Begin had been negotiating secretly with the Maronites in Beirut, with the Gemayels and the Chamouns. The Israelis and the Lebanese Maronites, the Phalangists, had worked out this scheme that the U.S. was really not aware of to drive out the Palestinians from Lebanon - I don't know if the intention was to drive out the Syrians as well and to install a very strong Phalangist government in Beirut that would enter into an unofficial alliance with Israel. This was all unbeknown to American policymakers. So, this was an unfolding event. Every day that the invasion went on, Israel kept expanding the scope of its military operations. The Syrians from the beginning were very alarmed by this. They saw this as a crisis. They deeply mistrusted Sharon and Begin and they called in Paganelli daily to consult about it. But as the war went on, as the Israelis crossed the Litani, they came into contact with Syrian tank units and they fought pretty fierce battles near Beirut and in the Bekaa and they destroyed a number of Israeli tank units. They attacked the Syrian missile units that had been deployed in the Bekaa and destroyed all of them without losing a single Israeli plane. The Syrian air force, which had carried on periodic clashes with Israel over Lebanese air space, came to the defense of Syrian forces in the Bekaa. In what was a stunning air battle, the Israelis shot down something like 85 Syrian jet fighters without losing a single plane of their own. At that point, the Israelis had uncontested control of Lebanese air space and the siege of Beirut started.

Q: Let's stop here for now. We're up to the time of the siege of Beirut. We'll talk about that. That was '82.

End of interview