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

LAWRENCE COHEN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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COHEN: My paternal great-grandparents, Adolph and Rose Markowitz, emigrated from Galicia, Austria-Hungary to America. They reached Pottstown, Pennsylvania in 1889. My grandmother Yetta, born in 1890, was the eldest of seven siblings who reached adulthood. My great-grandfather became a peddler. Despite his humble beginnings, he sent three sons to college. For my grandmother, college was never in the cards. Adolph Markowitz believed education for women was a frivolous luxury. She was stuck doing housework and raised younger siblings while her brothers became successes. My grandfather Abraham Cohen whom Yetta married in 1913 was a cigar-maker from Louisville, Kentucky. After their marriage they lived in Manchester, New Hampshire, where he went back work rolling cigars. My father, Norman Benjamin Cohen, was born there in August 1914, the month World War I broke out.

My grandmother was not impressed with her husband's profession. Within three years she pushed him into the same business as a brother-in-law and a slew of her cousins: retail shoes. By 1919 my grandfather purchased a humble shoe store back in her hometown of Pottstown. Abe Cohen was not a very savvy businessman and on numerous occasions he demonstrated exceedingly poor business acumen. Yet, despite the depression, World War II, and other traumatic experiences the Royal Shoe Store lasted 80 years, many times longer than most retail stores. My father was primarily responsible for the longevity of the business.

Q: Your father went into the shoe business.

COHEN: From about the age of four, my father lived in Pottstown. He was the eldest of four children, two boys and two girls. While in high school Dad labored for his father. In spite of the store, family circumstances were always close to the poverty line. Dad was very intelligent. He graduated Pottstown High School in 1931 at 16, the youngest in his class. He wanted to be an engineer. He applied to only one college, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), and was accepted. However, his parents refused to let him go. They claimed, disingenuously, that the family could not afford for him to go to college. So after graduation Dad slaved away in various dead-end shoe jobs throughout Pennsylvania during the Depression years.

We only learned about his life story in 1996, three years before his death when he and I collaborated on his memoirs. I turned the stories he recounted into a book manuscript I called the Chicken Hill Chronicle. Dad remembered vivid details about his childhood and the stories told to him by his grandfather and uncles. I hope to publish the Chicken Hill Chronicle which is both a colorful account of the Jewish immigrant experience in small town America and a boy's tragic relationship with his bitter mother.

Dad entered the army as one of the early draftees in May 1941. Yet, every weekend while in training he returned from Pine Camp, New York, to assist in the shoe store. Two years later, he was commissioned a lieutenant in the field artillery. By sheer luck, he was not sent overseas with his unit, the 28th Infantry Division. A hand injury during Tennessee maneuvers washed him out. All his fellow officers were killed during the bloody Hurtgen Forest campaign and the Battle of the Bulge. Dad never forgot them. He received his army discharge in 1946. Although Pottstown was the last place he wanted to go after the army, his parents beseeched him to come back and assist in the shoe store. As the dutiful son, he returned and kept the shoe store afloat. Six years later, he met my mother during a blind date in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They were engaged within weeks.

Q: What sort of education did your mother have?

COHEN: My mother, a born and bred New Yorker, received her business administration degree from CCNY, City College of New York. During the late 1940s, CCNY was one of the best avenues for the children of Jewish immigrants to get a quality college education. For the first half of the century, American universities had Jew quotas which limited the intake of Jewish students to no more than ten percent. But CCNY had no quotas. Mom got her degree and took the executive training program with Alexander's, the New York department store. She then worked for Emily Shops in New York as a bridal consultant. Emily Shops then sent Mom to manage their Harrisburg store, a ladies shop. That's where she met my father.

My mother's parents were immigrants as well. Both arrived in America while young children during the first years of the twentieth century. Mom's father, Harry Levine, served briefly in the U.S. Navy during the First World War. He married Lillian Gottlieb in 1925. My mother, one of two daughters, was born a year later. My grandfather was a successful salesman during the 1920s, but he lost his job and suffered terribly, as many did, during the Depression years of the 1930s. During the Depression, the family moved back in with Harry's in-laws, Eli and Sara Gottlieb. Towards the end of the 1930s, he started a toy manufacturing company in Manhattan, the Hale-Nass Corporation. The company lasted until the early 1960s when it went bankrupt and my grandparents retired to southern Florida, near Homestead. They lived peacefully in their small one bedroom home until August 1992 when their housing development, Naranja Lakes, was "Ground Zero" for Hurricane Andrew. Miraculously, they survived the storm shaken but unscathed. In their housing development, not one structure survived. Both my grandparents lived beyond the century mark, as did my great-aunt Dora.

Q: Did you grow in Pottstown?

COHEN: My parents married in 1952. They moved to Pottstown where Dad took over full control of the Royal Shoe Store. I was born in 1954, again the oldest of four. Dad built the shoe store during the 1950s and 1960s into a very respectable downtown business. It was a time when downtowns throughout the country served as the commercial heartbeat of America's economy. Pottstown's High Street was no exception. This is no longer true. Today, High Street is commercially dead. The creation of the shopping malls, the universal use of cars, poor decision-making by urban planners, and the disappearance of blue collar jobs in rust-bucket communities like Pottstown all contributed to this state of affairs.

My father also loved horses. We lived on a typical suburban middle class residential street in Pottstown's north end. Early on, Dad stabled a few horses a couple of blocks away. That was how close rural countryside was to Pottstown. In 1963 Dad purchased a twelve acre farm at an auction sale for $15,000. He turned around and sold the farmhouse for $12,000. It was a brilliant purchase. Dad stabled two or three horses and a pony there. We often rode in the surrounding fields and forests on Sundays. The farm was a couple of miles outside of town, hiking distance for young teenagers. Our family possessed three significant family properties during my youth: the Royal Shoe Store, the house on Logan Street, and the farm.

Q: Do you have brothers, sisters?

COHEN: I am the oldest of four; one brother David and then two sisters, Risa and Barbara. David lives in L.A. My sisters with their families both reside north of Orlando, Florida. My mother lives near Sea World, south of Orlando.

Q: Now to your family; how Jewish was your family, would you say?

COHEN: My paternal grandfather, Abe Cohen, was raised in Louisville, Kentucky. His parents, my great-grandparents Simon and Rachel Epstein Cohen, immigrated to America from Lithuania. They were Orthodox Jews, traditional to the point of bigotry. My grandmother's family, Adolph the peddler and his wife Rose, were religious bur less rigorously Orthodox. It was difficult to be zealous and fanatically religious in the traditional sense while living in small town America at the turn of the twentieth century. Dad claims my great-grandfather introduced him to eating traif, non-kosher food. Adolph learned how to accommodate his Jewish beliefs within the larger Christian culture of the community. Simon Cohen "walled-off" his Orthodox beliefs.

Dad grew up in a strictly kosher home. Grandpop Abe took after his father. He knew his liturgy well and often led services at the synagogue. Although my mother's side of the family was somewhat less tied to strict religious practice, Yetta's beliefs more closely tilted towards her husband's than to her father's. She kept strict kosher. Hers, I suppose, was more than just ethnic Judaism.

My parents raised us in an environment closely affiliated with the Conservative movement of Judaism. Pottstown has just one synagogue, Congregation Mercy & Truth founded in 1892, which serviced most of the Jewish families no matter their position on the religious spectrum. The synagogue is still in existence.

Q: Was there much of a Jewish community?

COHEN: In the 1950s and 1960s, Pottstown had about 75 Jewish families. A new synagogue which cost the community half a million dollarthat was a lot in the early 1960was dedicated in 1963. A small but very active Jewish community dominated our upbringing. Led by the mothers Pottstown's Jewish families were a tight knit group. My closest friends were Jewish. Andy and Bobby Lieb lived next door to us. Our fathers built stone steps on the ten foot hill that connected the two properties. That's how close we were. Their father owned Pottstown News Agency, a newspaper distribution company. Mark Rivlin lived two blocks away. His father Manny ran a salvage and scrap business. Also on our block lived the Friedburgs. David Friedberg was a year older than I. Although raised Episcopalian, he was "almost" Jewish. His father Elmer was our optometrist. Our ages were within a few years of each other. We had Christian neighbors, they were our friends, but our closest ties were with each other.

Hebrew school was held twice a week, Mondays and Tuesdays, from 4 to 6 p.m. Sunday school ran for two hours. Our parents were all best friends. It was a Jewish environment within Pottstown's larger non-Jewish culture. In Pottstown's Franklin Elementary and Northern Junior High Schools, I was always the only Jewish kid in my class. Unlike my father's generation, I witnessed little anti-Jewish behavior by fellow kids and felt no overt anti-Semitism in Pottstown. Our generation, fortunately, had missed the rabid anti-Semitism and racism so prevalent earlier. Yet, while Pottstown at the time was not palpably racist, it remained rigidly segregated. Blacks lived on the other side of town in the neighborhood where my father grew up. At Northern Junior High, I remember only one African-American, Bennie Sims. Even though during the early 1920s Dad attended elementary school with many African-Americans, only one African-American classmate reached high school. Dick Ricketts, the running back when Dad played end on the weak Pottstown High School football teams of 1929 and 1930, was expelled from school for getting his girlfriend pregnant. So some things had not changed into the 1960s.

Q: What sort of mix was Pottstown, ethnic-wise?

COHEN: Pottstown had its blue bloods, for sure. Every town in the eastern seaboard of the United States had the Protestant establishment, families that traced their ancestors back to colonial times. However, the majority of people in Pottstown could be defined as "ethnic." The town had a large Catholic mix of Eastern Europeans, Italians, and Irish. Their parents or grandparents arrived in Pottstown in search of factory jobs. In the 1960s Hispanics were almost non-existent. Today, they form a significant minority in Pottstown. In the farm region around Pottstown resided very traditional German groups: Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, Church of the Brethren, Lutherans, etc. Some possessed local roots back to the late seventeenth century. Numerous schools in the area founded as religious institutions became non-denominational later. Pottstown's significant African-American population dated to the Civil War. In Dad's day and even when I was growing up, most of Pottstown's African-Americans lived on Chicken Hill or south of the railroad tracks. My great-grandparents, my grandparents, and my father all lived on Chicken Hill until the early 1950s. As I said, Dad went to elementary school with many African-Americans. They were his playmates during recess and after school. All dropped out before reaching 7th grade. Forty years later, on the other side of town, I grew up with no African-American friends and attended a 100% white elementary school.

Q: Where would you put your parents politically?

COHEN: To my knowledge, nobody in my familwith one exception - ever voted Republican in presidential elections until 1972. That year when Richard Nixon trounced George McGovern, the family tilted to Nixon. It was a mistake. The combination of nasty, Watergate-era Republican dirty tricks and a terribly flawed McGovern campaign frightened many to vote reluctantly for Nixon. Regretfully, I was one of them. I turned eighteen that year on November 7, Election Day. It was the first national election following passage of the Twenty-sixth Amendment lowering the voting age to eighteen. Along with all others born that day in 1954, I was the youngest voter. That fall, I was a naï¿½ve freshman at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The Young Republicans on campus pulled out all the stops. I was hoodwinked as were so many voters. Never again, except for 1980 when I voted for John Anderson running as a third party candidate against Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. My grandparents had, I suppose, supported Eugene Debs, a socialist, and after Debs' death in 1926, his successor Norman Thomas. Perhaps Robert M. La Follette, the Progressive Party candidate in 1924, received their votes. Franklin Roosevelt was warmly liked. But I do not believe that until '72 any family member voted Republican, nor after.

The one exception was my great-grandfather Adolph. He claimed he supported the Republican Party. When asked by a lantzman, a colleague from the old country, why he supported Republican candidates, he allegedly responded that with Republicans in charge, "there was more money in it for him!" That was Adolph Markowitz!

Q: The election of 1972 was Nixon's re-election.

COHEN: Exactly. Nixon defeated McGovern convincingly. At the time, many voters feared George McGovern because of his erratic campaign, and unknowingly, dirty tricks by Nixon's campaign. Certainly the Thomas Eagleton affair, when McGovern's original vice presidential candidate dropped out because of his mental health history, did not help. The nasty tactics used by the Republican Party in that campaign contributed to the one-sided election.

Q: I was wondering whether there was any strain in the family of what I call European New York Jewish Socialism.

COHEN: My mother grew up in East Bronx. Mom went to Walton High School in the West Bronx, New York. She took two subway trains to get there. The Depression was really tough on the family. My grandparents move back in with my great-grandparents. However, the family was not Socialist. Harry Levine, my grandfather, was a businessman, a salesman. I am certain he perceived himself as a capitalist. He was a good salesman but not a very good capitalist. As I mentioned in the late 1930s he started a moderately operational toy factory on Broome Street in lower Manhattan, called the Hale-Nass Company. It manufactured cheap five and dime-type toys, like tin police hand-cuffs which he invented. His toys were found in stores like Woolworth's and W.T. Grant. Today, those toys garner a real premium on the eBay auction market.

The Cohen-Markowitz side of the family may have possessed a stronger Socialist streak. As I mentioned, Abe Cohen, my paternal grandfather, had a shoe store but could barely make ends meet. Although there was always food on the table, the Depression was rough on them as well. One great-uncle, Robbie Markowitz, was a social worker, a new profession in the early twentieth century. Another great-uncle, Sam Markowitz was a Reform rabbi. His background was unusual since he started out as an ordained Baptist preacher while attending Bucknell University. For more about Sam, you will have to read my forthcoming book! He was very engaged in social justice. We're not sure but he may have joined the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) founded in 1909. That might not be surprising. Until the Black Power movement on the late 1960s, there was strong affinity between Jews and African-Americans in the fight for justice and civil rights. Sam once told my father that he had marched with Dr. Martin Luther King. We found it tough to believe. He would have been in his 70s by the 1960s. But who knows?

Other members of my family were politically active. None, except for an uncle by marriage, also named Abe Cohen, married to Dad's sister, would I describe as having had activist Socialist leanings.

Q: What was it like growing up as a small kid in Pottstown?

COHEN: Growing up anywhere in America during the late '50s, '60s and early '70s was quite different than today. It was a much less complicated era. Gender roles were more strictly defined. When I walked home from Franklin Elementary School, Mom would usually be there to serve lunch before I went back to school in the afternoon. We did not question the authority of parents or teachers. I worked many afternoons and most weekends in the shoe store. Sometimes, I regretted not being out with friends. But I did not challenge my parents. If all else failed, I could sell shoes like my father. When I was a bit younger, the boys in the neighborhood, and sometimes a couple of the girls, played on the fields near our houses until dark. To call us home, my mother rang a cow bell. Andy's mother Barbara Lieb whistled loudly.

Among family members, there was never a question that we would eventually attend college. One reason behind my current authorship of the Chicken Hill Chronicle is to delve more deeply into this subject. Three years before he died, my father entered a severe depression. Pent-up memories emerged that he had repressed for so long. He and I collaborated on his autobiography. Among his most distressing memories was a realization that his mother, my grandmother, prevented him from becoming what he wanted to be in life. She kept him from attending college which my father always yearned to do. As I said, for us college was a given, no matter what. That was not true for most of my Pottstown peers. In fact, I suspect most of my junior high school classmates never did go on to get a college degree.

Q: As a kid in elementary, junior high, and high school, were you much of a reader?

COHEN: I read a lot. I can recollect some of the books that I read. Even today I could tell you which ones had significant influence in my life.

Q: Tell me.

COHEN: In junior high school, I read Alan Morehead's The Blue Nile which fascinated me. I never ever re-read books, but 35 years later I re-read The Blue Nile. About the same time, I read his other African saga The White Nile and re-read that as well. I also was very heavily influenced by Leon Uris, for example, his book QBVII; Max I. Dimont's Jews, God, and History; and James Michener's The Source which I read in 11th grade. That June after school ended our family spent three weeks in Israel on a family adventure. That really perked my interest in the Middle East and Israel. Three years later I attended Tel Aviv University for my junior year. I read the assortment of contemporary and classic fiction for that era. My favorite books were historic novels or actual historical sagas.

Q: Did this sort of set you apart from the other kids in your class?

COHEN: In a way. By comparison with my classmates I was among the more intellectually inclined I suppose. I loved sports but was not much of an athlete; I was very small and light weight for my age. In eighth grade I started the Junior Varsity wrestling season in the lightest weight class, seventy-five pounds. At Perkiomen School, a preparatory school in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania, where I went to high school, I played JV football my junior year but was the smallest kid on the team. I was not much of a music buff. In those days, kids were listening to WFIL, AM 560, a radio station out of Philadelphia. WFIL played top 30 hits. After I got home from school, I listened to another station out of Philadelphia, KYW - all news all the time. I certainly marched to the beat of a different drummer. I never went on dates when I was in junior high or high school.

Q: Up through high school, did the outside world intrude much?

COHEN: Depends on your definition. There were events, clearly, that had an impact on my way of thinking. The 1967 Six Day War in which Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria was a very big event, especially in Jewish household. In Mr. McCurdy's ninth grade social studies class, a year and a half later, I delivered a class project about the Six Day War. I went into the Pottstown Public Library in the old post office building. Outside stood a statue and monument honoring those who died in the Civil War. I spent 25 cents per page, a huge sum in those days, to photocopy maps and pictures of the war. I pasted the pictures on poster board. A photocopy machine was a new innovation. Each page took at least 10 seconds to make. The paper was warm when it emerged from the machine. Twenty-five cents was enough to buy five candy bars at Bause's Drug Store. I really wanted to do well in that class.

When President John Kennedy was assassinated, November 22, 1963, I was sitting in Mrs. Schwenk's fourth grade class. It was a bright November afternoon. We attended a memorial service at the synagogue a day later. Other events of that era include the wild '68 Democratic Convention in Chicago, the Vietnam War, and the race riots that occurred in Watts, Detroit, and elsewhere.

Vietnam was our wallpaper for everything. Each evening, the television news anchors such as Walter Cronkite on CBS announced the latest casualty figures from the war. It was not something that had a direct impact on the Cohen family. But the fact that a war was going on was inescapable.

Vietnam had little direct impact on me. I was a bit young to worry about the draft. I turned eighteen at which age young men had to register with Selective Service, only in 1972. Yet, I did have a funny feeling. On New Year's Eve 1966, I remember watching television. A prognosticator, a heavy set man with a beard, answered questions about what 1967 would bring. "What about Vietnam?" the interviewer asked. "The Vietnam War will not end until 1972," the prognosticator answered. I made a quick mental calculation. That would be the year I turned eighteen. In 1972 when my eighteenth birthday came, I was already a freshman at Dickinson College. My Selective Service lottery number was drawn while I was a freshman. My number was 123. However, the draft was over by then. Vietnam in 1973 was like a surgical wound that everyone hoped would heal, except that infection set in. A couple of years later the communist north took control over the south.

Q: How about the Soviet Union, the Cold War?

COHEN: I remember air raid sirens and nuclear attack drill exercises in elementary school. When the warning siren went off, we ducked below our desks. I'm sure some folks in town had bomb shelters but I never saw one. We certainly didn't have one on Logan Street. The Cold War, at least at the local level in Pottstown, was not palpable. Pottstown was not a military town. There were no army bases nearby or military-related industry in the town, although Pottstown had a lot of heavy industry. The Cold War again was like wallpaper - in the background, but not felt directly.

Q: Well by the time you graduated from high school?

COHEN: Nineteen seventy-two.

Q: Seventy-two. And your parents, particularly your father was pushing for college. Did you have any place in mind?

COHEN: I will take a step back. When I was growing up, Pottstown High School - the only high school in town - was not academically well regarded. My father was adamant that his children would not attend it. He wanted to send me to The Hill School, a prestigious boarding school in Pottstown. The Hill School took some day students. When I was an eighth grader, Dad took me there for some sort of test. The school administrator informed me - supposedly since I do not remember - that I passed and could join the school the following semester. At the time, a few months after my Bar Mitzvah, I was not eager to leave my friends in Northern Junior High School. I was content there. For some reason, I neglected to tell my parents that I passed the test. My father was not very happy about that.

By ninth grade, things had changed. I enjoyed junior high school much less. When my parents sought to send me to Perkiomen School, a private boarding school about 15 miles from Pottstown, I acquiesced. I never attended Pottstown High School. The parents had planned it all. Other Jewish kids from Pottstown also would be going there. We were day students. Initially, each morning, one parent took the crew to school while another parent picked us up in the late afternoon. Within a few months, one or two of us were old enough to drive. The first car I drove was a 1963 Buick Special. Gasoline was $0.29 a gallon at the Gulf Station on Route 663.

Perk was perhaps the best academic experience I could have had. It was a wise choice by my parents. The school fed my intellectual curiosity and prepared me for college. In 1972, I graduated Perkiomen and that fall entered Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Q: What does Perkiomen mean?

COHEN: In southeastern Pennsylvania, many place names come from old Indian words. Perkiomen, I am told, means "clouded waters where the cranberries lie." In the eighteenth century the name was given to a major stream that flowed through western Montgomery County into the Schuylkill River. That area of northwestern Montgomery County is still called the Perkiomen Valley. Perkiomen School, founded in 1873 by the Schwenkfelders, began as a denominational religious school. Schwenkfelders were a tiny Protestant sect that had suffered persecution in Europe. The first Schwenkfelders arrived in Pennsylvania in the 1730s. Perkiomen was a boys' school of about 200 students. Starting in 1969, the year I entered, it became co-ed starting with just five girls.

Q: How different was the school than the public schools?

COHEN: From an academic perspective the Pottstown public school system was mediocre. Outside of town, school districts such as Pottsgrove just a mile from our house and Owen J. Roberts on the south side of the Schuylkill River from Pottstown were considered better. Pottstown had two junior high schools; they were not middle schools in those days. The two junior highs fed into the one high school. Because of the de facto segregation in Pottstown, by the time all the students reached high school, groups that had never associated now were brought together for tenth grade. It was a combustible mix. In the late 1960s, most of Pottstown was still very blue collar. Moreover, there was little academic stimulation. My father understood that perfectly. He attended the town's public schools 40 years earlier. Sure enough, none of his children went to Pottstown High School. At that time, a Perkiomen education for one year as a non-boarding student was about $900. Today, if you were to board there, it would be about $40,000.

In the late 1960s Perkiomen School underwent many of the social strains found in the larger society. Drugs were a major problem on campus. Many students particularly from New York and other cities rebelled against the traditional authority of a boarding school. They challenged school dress codes and haircut rules. Unless a school like Perk could change with the times yet still retain its competitive advantages, it would die. To survive Perk metamorphosed dramatically in a very short period of time. One of the major changes was the introduction of co-education. After a few years, the co-ed structure at Perk became the norm. But initially, it was a tough row to hoe for many faculty and students, and especially for the few girls.

Q: What type of courses particularly struck you?

COHEN: I enjoyed all social sciences, especially history, geography and government. Subtly, there was another influence. When I was nine or ten, my mother introduced me to stamp collecting. I still am an accumulator and possess an extensive collection. Over the years I expanded her world collection. Mom still manages our U.S. and Israel stamp collections. I maintain our collection for the rest of the world. Stamps sparked a fascination with geography, history, and foreign cultures. During my freshman year at Dickinson College, I challenged my college roommates that I could name every country in the world. This was when I was a college freshman! Of course, they took me up on the bet. I missed four. Three happened to be some obscure islands in the Pacific.

Q: Nauru or something like that.

COHEN: I do not remember. Whatever speck of island was independent back then. The fourth one, which I kicked myself over, was Sierra Leone in west Africa. That is pretty good for a college freshman of any generation.

Q: When you consider that one reads about tests where some college students have a hard time identifying where the Pacific Ocean is.

COHEN: As a stamp collector, not only did I know countries that existed, I was familiar with countries that formerly existed, were colonies, etc. If you want to learn about geography, history, and the breadth of social studies, there is no better hobby.

Q: You were at Dickinson from '72 to?

COHEN: Seventy-six.

Q: Dickinson; tell me a little about Dickinson at that time.

COHEN: As things turned out, Dickinson College probably was not the best fit for me. I majored in history, but that was not enough. I spent my junior year at Tel Aviv University, in Israel. It was a fantastic experience. When I returned to Dickinson for my senior year, I already had sufficient credits for my history major. I asked the school to allow me a second major in Middle East studies. I had already accumulated quite a few courses already that pertained to this area of study.

Dickinson did not offer such a major. The school administration asked what I proposed. To get the necessary coursework, I suggested attending another school for my last semester senior year. I applied to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia which offered plenty of Middle East studies courses. Generally, students do not go off campus their senior year, especially the last semester. I had to convince two faculty committees, a committee for off campus study and an academic committee that would consider the proposed major. Each committee passed the buck to the other. "We'll okay the major if the off-campus studies committee will let you go off campus to get the courses...It depends on whether the other committee allows you to declare a Middle East studies major." I fixed this catch-22 situation and became, perhaps, among the first Dickinson students to go off campus my last semester and then earn a major in Middle East studies.

Q: You went to Tel Aviv University your junior year. What was your view at the time from your family regarding Israel?

COHEN: My parents and grandparents were committed Zionists. My father was a strong supporter of Israel. He bought Israel bonds and subscribed to The Jerusalem Post. He received the Friday edition which arrived in Pottstown the following Tuesday. Dad was very informed of what was going on in Israel. As I mentioned, in 1971 we made a family visit there: siblings, my parents and my grandfather Abe. We traveled for three weeks throughout the country, including the West Bank. It was quite an experience. I became infatuated with the country and its people. And when I say "people," I mean everyone, not just the Israeli Jews. The place was still a bit giddy about the successful Six Day War of 1967.

In August 1974, I arrived in Tel Aviv for my junior year. It was a different place than in 1971. The Yom Kippur War of October 1973 less than a year earlier traumatized the country. There was a palpable subdued pall among the Israelis. Israelis viewed the future more pessimistically than I remembered in 1971. Yet, despite the more somber atmosphere, there remained freedom of movement in the entire country.

When I departed for Israel, my father suggested I get a car and offered to pay. No foreign student at Tel Aviv University, to my knowledge, had a car. Certainly, none of the Americans had cars. Dad reasoned that when Mom and he would visit me during the academic year, the car would pay for itself. It was expensive to rent a car. Dad felt it was cheaper to buy one and then sell it at the end of my academic year. Dad knew a car could be purchased and sold "passport to passport" without paying an exorbitant tax. I doubt many other parents were familiar with the uniquely Israeli rule. With my father's money and my passport, I brought a car, a Peugeot 304S from an Iranian Jew who, I believe, was returning to Tehran. I learned to drive stick on that car. The clutch took a beating!

With that car, I had mobility that few enjoyed, even though Egged buses went almost everywhere. I could go beyond "almost everywhere." On one trip, friends and I traveled to Nablus on a transit of the West Bank. At an Arab restaurant there, I remember eating the sweetest tomatoes I ever ate in my life. I drove through Gaza. Today, people would not believe it. We went to the beach in Gaza. We visited Jericho. We drove up to the Golan Heights. Remarkably, at no time, except for when we entered a refugee camp, Al-Bureij, in the Gaza Strip, did we ever feel antagonism, anger, or bitterness from the Arab people. We drove along the Lebanese border; at the time you could drive right on the border patrol road. The border fence was topped with barbed wire. On the other side, perhaps ten meters away, Lebanese taxi drivers in their Mercedes Benz sedans drove parallel to us. We drove one way, they drove the other way. We waved to them and they waved back. A completely different world than what came later.

There was a school program - I do not remember the details - which brought young Israelis, Palestinians, and us expatriates together at an off site retreat. It took place at Har Gilo near Jerusalem. At the event, participants represented all political sides. The committed hard line included Betar-type, die-hard Israelis and New Yorkers who would become the West Bank settlers. They were extremely rigid in their Jewish/Israeli ideology. Some of the Arabs also took a hard line. Then, there were the more dovish, pacifist types. They claimed there must be a better way. What an education for me!

In the intervening years, I rarely discussed Middle East politics. However, twenty-five years later, in 2001, I discussed this issue with a friend who was an Israeli diplomat in Nigeria. I told Sharon that in my view, based on my 1970s experience in Israel, a unique opportunity to achieve a permanent peace settlement was lost in that epoch. I witnessed it right there at Har Gilo. It was lost, I said, because at that critical historical juncture, Israel had not encouraged democracy or the building of democratic institutions among the Palestinian people. Had it done so then, had there been free elections on the West Bank, had the government encouraged some form of self-determination rather than dependency on Jordan, history would have been forever changed. That is how I feel today. Of course, the Palestinians would have had to agree, a big if in hindsight. My experience in Israel had a deep impact on my future.

Q: As a young American Jew going to Tel Aviv University, did you feel you were in a brainwashing situation?

COHEN: I was more sophisticated than that. I did not grow up, as some of my peers, in a Jewish-dominated cultural environment. I did not grow up in New York City, on Long Island or in northern New Jersey. I had been surrounded by non-Jewish culture, the kind of culture where we sang "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring" in the junior high school choir. True, I did not know any Muslims; no one in American knew what Muslim was back in those days. But I enjoyed a greater comfort level in a non-Jewish milieu than some of my peers.

At Tel Aviv University, I endeavored to learn Hebrew. I attended ulpan, intensive Hebrew for 10 weeks. I then continued with regular Hebrew lessons and took introductory Arabic. Unfortunately, the Arabic never really took. The class was taught in Hebrew and I lacked real Hebrew fluency. I was really lost in that class. I had a roommate, Bruce Dezube, from Colonia, New Jersey. He had good command of Hebrew. When he arrived in Israel, he did not know that his surname, as pronounced, was an epithet in Arabic! Something kids called each other in the streets! He only learned this fact when we started the Arabic class together. He was so panic-stricken. I will not go into any more details. If anyone who follows this transcript knows any Arabic, they will understand in a moment what I am talking about!

Q: I never served in Israel but one of the things I have heard is some of the most hard line individuals, in other words right wingers, were failed gas station operators from Long Island.

COHEN: I suspect that is a bit of an exaggeration; there were probably some cabbies also. From my mother's side of the family, we have Israeli cousins, Uri and Marga Goren. Uri was a sabra, a native-born of Eretz Yisrael. Marga barely avoided the holocaust. She had been on a "kinder-transport" to England just before World War Two broke out. Uri was a radio operator on board a ship smuggling Jews into British-mandate Palestine after the war. It was straight out of the movie Exodus. Marga was on-board. They lived in a small hamlet near Rishon LeZion. After Israel's independence in 1948, Uri had served in the Signal Corps. He rose in rank as an officer in the army, retired from the military, and started his own successful company. Uri was a committed dove. He was close to the leadership of Shinui, in Hebrew "change." Shinui was the perhaps Israel's most dovish political party of the time. Ari Lova Eliav, a famous Israeli author and a leader of Shinui, was Uri's close friend. I met Eliav at Uri's house when I visited them on Saturdays.

Q: How did you find Tel Aviv University? Were there political strains running through it or was similar to Dickinson?

COHEN: Far more debate took place at Tel Aviv University than at Dickinson College in rural Pennsylvania. My courses pertained to the Middle East, an incendiary field of study under any circumstance. The courses tilted towards relevance to Israel. Start with archeology, a highly political profession in that part of the world. I studied contemporary politics of the Middle East. To my memory, my professors were not particularly ideological. They were well known then and later. Professor Itamar Rabinovich taught about Syria. He later went into politics. A strong strain of Israeli nationalism existed at the university. However, it was also a free thinking environment. I did not sense excessive prejudice or bias beyond what one might normally find on a campus like that. Remember, this is right after the Yom Kippur War. Hundreds of Israeli soldiers died in the war, including a cousin, Uri's nephew. Yes, strains of rancor and bitterness permeated. There was popular frustration with Prime Minister Golda Meir, who by the way lived a couple of blocks away. More than anger, there was consternation and frustration with the Arab governments. Arab governments, Israelis felt, had been handed an opportunity to make peace and turned it down. This is four years before Anwar Sadat traveled to Jerusalem.

It was a fascinating period to be there. The Sinai Desert had not yet been returned to Egypt. I drove around the Sinai, down to Sharm el-Sheikh. The very tip of Sinai, Ras Mohammad, was a desolate beach, but the snorkeling was amazing. We hiked up Jebel Musa, Mount Sinai to catch the dawn. What a beautiful place. The front lines between Israel and Egypt were just east of the Suez Canal. This experience made a large impression on me as far as my future career. During that year, I decided to apply to graduate school for an international relations program.

Q: At the university did you get any feel about Israelis attitudes towards the Palestinians? Was there much contact?

COHEN: Some Palestinians studied at university and we did have some contact. I mentioned the retreat at Har Gilo. Students studied contemporary history and political science, so of course there was debate. When I returned to the U.S. and attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia my final semester, the rift you postulated seemed much deeper. At the University of Pennsylvania, a clear schism existed on campus between some Jewish students and some Arab/Palestinian studentdeeper than what I witnessed at Tel Aviv University. I again took classes about contemporary politics of the Middle East. I was friends with Arabs and Jews. The University of Pennsylvania has a very strong Middle East studies program. I also took intensive Arabic as well as Hebrew. I was close to a few Palestinians who shared a house west of campus. Perhaps because I had a car, they were friendly to me. I occasionally drove them to the Italian market on 10th Street; they liked to buy food from the sidewalk vendors. I visited the Arab house, ate hummus and pita, and did other things with them.

Q: Did you have any contact while you were at Tel Aviv University with either our embassy or our consulate?

COHEN: In Israel, no. The first time I had contact with a U.S. mission was immediately after departing Israel. For my return to the states, I possessed a one-month Eurorail pass. I planned to backpack through Europe. On June 16, 1975, I flew from Tel Aviv to Schwechat Airport, Vienna, Austria. I had my backpack and a Tel Aviv University day pack. I had no reservations and a vague notion of where I wanted to travel for the next month.

It was my first time in Europe. From the airport I took the shuttle bus into downtown Vienna. After a sandwich and a beer and a visit to the Opera House, I searched for a youth hostel. I took a trolley to Esterhazy Park but the hostel there was full. I tried calling around but was unsuccessful (I was probably dialed the telephone incorrectly and was being cut off.) Disgusted, I walked back to the Operring in the heart of the city. I ran into two Israeli girls who had been on the El Al flight. They suggested the information desk located in an underpass beneath the Operring. I hurried to the information desk. The clerk found a room for me at a pension and provided directions. I walked away from the desk. Absent-mindedly, I put down my Tel Aviv University pack. I moved away from it for a momenI cannot remember why. Suffice to say that when I came back to the information counter the bag was gone. In that bag were my passport, airline ticket, and traveler's checks! Here I was, in Europe just a couple of hours, and I already lost my passport, etc.!

Immediately, I was directed to the nearest police station on Goethegasse to file a police report. The police knew little English; I spoke no German. Eventually, after excruciating paperwork, I reached the pension, the Hotel Adlefhof, 100 shillings a night. The clerk asked me for my passport. I handed him the police report. He looked through me like I was a piece of scum. I carried my backpack up five flights of narrow stairs to my room. Exhausted by the whole episode, I slept for twelve hours straight. Early the next day, I started the process of replacing my travel documents. I had two kinds of traveler's checks: Bank of America and First National City Bank. Bank of America would not replace the checks without a passport. First National City was more accommodating. I received $250 in replacement checks for the $300 I lost. I walked to the embassy, an ornate which building. The information desk instructed me to go to the consulate. I walked ten minutes to the other side of the Votiv Kische Cathedral. I climbed the five flights of stairs flights to the consular offices.

At the time, I did know what a consulate was. I entered a small waiting area, no bigger than 12 feet by 12 feet. I went up to the window and said hello. "I'd like to report a missing passport, my own. My name is Lawrence..." and the guy said 'Cohen?' He explained that my bag was at the police station near the kanal, a different station than the one where I had filed the report. My bag had been brought in by the Israeli girls. I quickly went to the station. Everything was there, including the passport. God was benevolent with me and must have smiled at the fool that I was. The girls saw the Tel Aviv University bag and figured it belonged to me. They did not see me, collected the bag, and took it to the nearest police station to where they were staying. I went through the process of reversing the traveler's checks. That was my first exposure to an American mission abroad.

A day later, I had another epiphany about the world. Vienna left a bad taste in my mouth, for obvious reasons. I traveled by train to Passau, Germany, in far eastern Bavaria. In Passau, the Danube River is joined by the Inn and Ilz Rivers and enters Austria. It is a beautiful town with the stunning St. Stephen's Cathedral. This was my first time in Germany. A fellow youth hostel guest, Mark, and I went into town to find a restaurant. We found a worker's joint that served typical meat and potatoes fare. I had a Hell Biere, a nice lager. The gregarious middle aged man who ran the place came over to talk with us. He said he had been a master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force and had also served in the French Foreign Legion. He claimed to have been in Vietnam. Coincidently, Saigon had fallen to the North Vietnamese just ten weeks earlier. He said he had lived in Texas and California. Mark asked where he was stationed in California. "Ahh.. in the south." "Was it White Sands?" "Ya, ya, it was that place." (White Sands is in New Mexico.) I then noticed that he had a swastika tattoo on his arm. He admitted he had been in the SS but that was all he said about the war.

I have no doubt that he had been in the military - the German military. I suspected he had been a prisoner of war. It was a dramatic introduction to Germany.

If that was not enough, a week later I visited the concentration camp at Dachau. Much of it was open space with just two reconstructed barracks and a few guard towers. I met a Yugoslav man standing on a spot in the middle of the parade ground. We communicated in a combination of pidgin German and English. He explained he had been a prisoner at Dachau for three years, from 1942 to its liberation in 1945. Each day for roll-call, which often lasted for hours, he had stood on this very spot. Soon after, I met an Austrian who settled in Australia after the war. He had been a prisoner in Dachau in 1938. He described his life in the camp, the work, the cold, the clothes, the beatings. "Look around at how green and pretty this place is," he said. "It was not like this then. If there had been grass, we would have eaten it."

Q: Let us go back. You graduated and got your degree from Dickinson.

COHEN: The University of Pennsylvania transferred my final semester credits to Dickinson. Penn's spring semester ended two weeks earlier than Dickinson's. I was assured there would be no problem with the transcript reaching the Dickinson registrar in time for graduation. I returned to Carlisle for graduation day. I had my cap and gown. My family came for the ceremony. Although we were as yet unaware of the details of his past, for my father who had always wanted to attend college, this must have been an awesome moment. In alphabetical order, we filed in line. A woman with a clipboard checked off the names. "Who are you?" she asked. I told her. "We do not have your name on the list." "What do you mean?" I replied. She said there was no diploma for me; I was not slated for graduation. Moreover, if I remained in line, every person following me would receive the incorrect diploma when they were called forward!

Perhaps Penn had delayed getting the transcripts to Dickinson. Maybe Dickinson got the transcript to late to process. I had failed to double check. I knew I had to bail out of the graduation line, but I did not want to be too obvious. So I stood with my peers. We filed into the ceremony which because of rain was indoors at the Holland Union Center dining hall. I sat down with everyone else. The hall was terribly muggy. We sat through the speeches. When the time came to receive the diplomas, everyone stood up. The graduates filed out of the dining hall, walked outside, and then returned to the hall through a different entrance. While the line of seniors filed back in, I ducked out of the line. Everyone called up received their degree. My name, of course, was not called. As the graduates filed back to their seats in groups, I slipped in and sat down with them. No one noticed, except of course my parents!

They were not happy! My father was apoplectic. Afterwards, I spoke with college officials. They assured me I would graduate with the next class, in September. And I did. The committee which determined who can receive a degree had not included my name when they met. I clearly had all the necessary credits. Although I support the college and donate regularly, even today I have a sour taste about Dickinson. My stepdaughter attended Dickinson for one year, 2005-06, but she found the school not academically-intense enough. After her freshman year, she transferred to William & Mary.

Q: This is 1976. And what were you up to?

COHEN: That September, I entered graduate school. I attended the University of Chicago, the School of Social Sciences, Committee on International Relations. That summer preceding graduate school, like all my summers, I worked in the shoe store. I never had to seek summer employment. I graduated with my M.A. in 1978 and after a six month hiatus, began a program for a Masters in Business Administration at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, downtown campus. During the day, I worked as a bank teller at Water Tower Bank, 717 N. Michigan Avenue. The bank no longer exists. I worked there and attended classes in the evenings. The Kellogg School was just two blocks from the bank. I usually ate dinner at the Walgreen's lunch counter across the street.

Significantly more than Dickinson College, the University of Chicago was academically stimulating, the students all highly motivated. For the most part the professors were top notch. My Chicago experience prepared me well for the future, including the Foreign Service.

Q: Do you have any shoe stories, or salesman stories?

COHEN: Shoe stories? I have plenty. Most are family lore told by my father. The business itself was founded in 1917 by my grandfather Abe. He and my grandmother and their toddler son set up the store in Pottstown with the help of my great-grandfather Adolph and my great-uncles. The Royal Shoe Store never achieved commercial success; my grandfather frequently made poor business decisions. With loyalty and moxie, Dad bailed him out time and time again. Even during the war when my father was stationed in upstate New York, he returned weekends to assist in the store. The war years were tougas were the Depression years. Inventory was almost impossible to obtain since all raw materials were directed to the war effort. Shoes were severely rationed. On the basis of historic sales, each store was provided an allotment amount by the Office of Price Administration. Initially, my grandfather foolishly provided the OPA with a ridiculously small number so his allotment of inventory was tiny.

One weekend while on leave, my father called on the Health Spot salesman, Mr. O'Rurick. Dad knew O'Rurick from before the war. Dad was in uniform. The salesman was happy to hear from Dad and asked him many questions about the army and how he was handling army life. The salesman evidently liked my father. Dad finally got around to asking for inventory. "How many pairs of health Spot Shoes can I order?" "Order as many as you want," O'Rurick replied. "Whatever the Royal Shoe Store needs, it can have." Dad ordered shoes as if he was ordering for a chain of stores.

When the Health Spot Shoes rolled in, my grandfather was apoplectic with Dad's largesse. "How could you do this?" he exclaimed. "We'll be stuck with these shoes!" He accused my father of buying inventory like a drunken sailor. All these kids shoes, he argued, was going to be the death of the Royal Shoe Store.

It was the best thing that could have happened to the store and my grandparents. Any inventory during World War II rationing was invaluable. My grandmother later described it as "manna from heaven." Those shoes my father obtained as a result of that one meeting saved the Royal Shoe Store. For the first time in their lives, my grandparents were on "Easy Street." That is a Royal Shoe Store story, not a Larry Cohen story.

A less dramatic shoe store story that involves me occurred when I was in eighth grade. I was a manager on the Northern Junior High School football team. "Manager," of course, meant that I did the dirty work: picked up the sweaty towels, carried the balls out to the field, etc. Just before a game one day, the coach noticed a severe shortage of shoelaces. You cannot play football - maybe now you could since no one ties their shoelaces todawithout shoelaces. I called Dad. They rushed the shoelaces to the school. The team laced up.

For three years, from 1968 to 1970, Pottstown boasted a professional minor league football team called the Pottstown Firebirds. The Pottstown Firebirds played in the Atlantic Coast Football League, which was only in existence in the late '60s. Pottstown was the farm team of the Philadelphia Eagles. League teams existed up and down the East Coast, from Richmond all the way to Lowell, Massachusetts. They were the farm clubs of the Giants, the Jets, the Packers, Redskins, and the Colts. That initial year, my father was program manager for the Pottstown Firebirds. We went to all the home games. Curiously, the shoe store became involved with the Firebird cheerleaders. Why? Those cheerleaders needed white cheerleader boots, the stretchy patent leather kind, pulled up all the way to the knee. Pictures of the cheerleaders pulling on those white patent leather boots from the Royal Shoe Store were splashed on the pages of the Pottstown Mercury. This is a small town environment.

Dad took us to a few of the Firebird's away games. The first time I flew on an airplane was September 1968. The Firebirds were playing at the home field of the Virginia Sailors. My father chartered a four-seater Beechcraft-type aircraft. We flew from Pottstown Airport, which was more like an airstrip, to Dulles Airport. Dulles had been dedicated less than six years earlier. The Virginia Sailors played at Herndon High School, not far from Dulles. It was Saturday, early evening, when we landed at Dulles Airport. The airport was closed! There were no lights, no people in the airport. The people movers were parked. We walked through the empty terminal. We went by back roads to this rural high school, Herndon High. It was all farmland, no subdivisions or malls. I thought we were in the Deep South. Pottstown lost the game ten to seven despite outplaying the home team. The Firebird players later said that when a Pottstown running back pushed the ball over the goal line, the referee picked up the ball and move it back to the one yard line.

This was my memory of Herndon, Virginia, 1968. Fast forward to 2006 when we returned to Washington from our last overseas assignment. We purchased a house in Herndon, Virginia. And guess where David, my stepson, goes to high school? The same school which hosted the Pottstown Firebirds-Virginia Sailors game in 1968.

Q: Let us look at your time at the University of Chicago. During this time was there a significant other?

COHEN: During my four years in Chicago, there were quite a few significant others. I was active socially. I was deeply engaged in a hobby that I first undertook while still at Dickinson, caving. Although I'm less active now, I still cave when I can. On Fridays we car pooled to southern Indiana, southern Illinois, and occasionally Missouri, and caved. I formed close friendships with many Chicago cavers. Most of my social life revolved around caving and cavers. I belonged to the Windy City Grotto chapter of the National Speleological Society (NSS). As a Dead Head, I attended numerous Grateful Dead concerts in Chicago and throughout the Midwest. For tickets I sometimes stood in line for hours. Yes, it was fun. It was a great time.

Q: Were any political tides going over at the graduate school at Chicago? Were undergraduates demonstrating all over the place?

COHEN: In the late 1970s, the politics were non-violent. Chicago's most well know demonstrations occurred in Grant Park during the 1968 Democratic Convention, a decade earlier. One of my significant others during this period, Karen Elwell, was a native Chicagoan and had been in Grant Park in 1968. She was familiar with the political upheavals of that era. In about 1970, anti-Vietnam War students had occupied the University of Chicago administration building, a pattern repeated at numerous campuses across the country. The late 1970s were more of a "When Harry Met Sally" era. In fact the opening of the Rob Reiner movie staring Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan occurs on the U. of C. campus. The talkative and philosophical "Harry" was the prototypical Chicago student.

Shortly after I arrived in Chicago, in December 1976, Chicago's longtime mayor, Richard J. Daley, died. He had served for twenty-one years as Chicago's mayor and had been the city's undisputed power broker and boss. His death altered the political landscape of the city. To complete Daley's term, the City Council selected Michael Bilandic. But Bilandic's ineptitude following a severe Chicago snowstorm led to the temporary overthrow of the city machine. I voted in the February 1979 election when Bilandic lost to party outcast Jane Byrne. That winter had been horrendous. Election Day, however, was sunny and warm, probably the first non-freezing day since mid-December. Thus, voter turnout was huge and it was all anti-Bilandic. In Chicago I learned that politics really was local. The local newspapers, the Tribune and the Sun Times carried little else beyond Cook County and some Springfield (the state capital) politics.

Q: That old phrase from Chicago: vote early and vote often.

COHEN: I voted in Chicago in only one local election. When I left Chicago for Washington to join the Foreign Service in 1980, I voted absentee. I then re-registered in Pennsylvania.

Q: What courses were you taking at the University of Chicago?

COHEN: I continued with Arabic. As part of my international relations program, I took "U.S. Post-War Foreign Policy" with Morton Kaplan, "Muslim National Communism in the USSR" with Alexandre Benningsen, "Political Geography" with Norton Ginsberg, "Political Sociology" with Morris Janowitz, "Economic Growth and Agricultural Development" with Bert Hoselitz, and a few courses specifically on Middle East Affairs which was my specialization. Although I attended Chicago, I did not concentrate on economics. At the time, Milton Freidman's Monetarist school was in full bloom. He won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1976. Nor was I a follower of the political theorist Leo Strauss. These strains of academic thought were uniquely Chicago. Three times a week at 8:00 a.m. I attended "Analysis and Appraisal of Development Projects" with Arnold Harberger, a close companion of Friedman. Many of his worshipping students in that class were from Latin America. Many rose high in their respective finance and economics ministries. Harberger served as an advisor to the Chilean Government of Augusto Pinochet, a controversial topic on campus. Fortunately, I only audited the course. Because I lacked a solid analytical and statistical grounding in economics, I did not understand a damn thing the entire semester!

The title of my 1977 Master's Thesis was "Water Resource and Agricultural Development in the High Dam Era: The Case of Egypt and Sudan." The impact of the Aswan Dam on Egypt I got pretty much right. I confess, however, I really called it wrong when I described Sudan as Africa's future agricultural breadbasket. Basket case was more about apt!

The University of Chicago was intellectually stimulating. To be in the library at midnight, on a weekend, was no embarrassment.

Q: When were you doing this?

COHEN: This was 1976 to 1978.

Q: This is right after Nixon resigned.

COHEN: Nixon resigned in August 1974, soon after I arrived at Tel Aviv University. Chicago was the late '70s, coinciding with the administration of President Jimmy Carter. My best buddy at the University of Chicago, Michael Delaney - he is currently a Foreign Service Officehad attended Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, prior to graduate school. Michael had been the editor of the Emory school newspaper and was very familiar with Carter and the people around him. Before the 1976 election, Michael told me he could not vote for Carter but would support Eugene McCarthy. I asked why. "Larry, the problem is that I know these guys. It's hard to vote for a president when I know all the people around him are less smart than I am." Michael was not being pompous. Another U of C colleague was John Ikenberry who studied political science. After leaving Chicago, I lost contact with John. He is now a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. I admire both greatly.

Another Jimmy Carter story comes to my mind. In late 1976, cavers from Chicago traveled to TAG country (TAG - Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia) on a caving trip. Richard Schreiber, a well known caver from Georgia, since deceased, told them "we're not having Thanksgiving this year." "Why not?" my buddies asked. Schreiber replied "we sent our turkey to Washington!"

Carter attempted some good things. I remember when Egyptian President Sadat traveled to Jerusalem, the breakthrough at Camp David. President Carter deserved credit for that. Other foreign policy issues torpedoed Carter's presidency. We were having beers at a bar the night the hostages were taken in Tehran, November 4, 1979. Some of my university friends were Persian studies majors. While I studied Arabic, they studied Farsi. Some of them hoped to conduct field work in Iran. When the revolution began and the Shah departed in 1978, those guys lost their shot. Their professor, Marvin Zonis, did okay. He was interviewed frequently on Nightline with Ted Koppel.

Q: Were there any strains regarding the Middle East? How did that work?

COHEN: One of my professors at Chicago was Leonard Binder. He was Jewish; I understood he actually had fought for the new state of Israel in 1948. As a political science professor at Chicago, if I had to characterize him, I would say he was an Arabist. He taught his class in Arabic! Was he an ideologue? I don't know. Students often took an intellectual view towards contentious issues. Certainly, Jewish-Arab tensions were more prevalent at Penn than at Chicago. Alexandre Bennigsen, an elderly ï¿½migrï¿½ professor, was a respected scholar on Muslim cultures in Central Asia during the early rise of the Soviet Union. I really liked him as a gentleman. I wrote papers for his class on Sufism, Naqshbandi Islam, etc. In class he insisted that the Soviet Union faced a demographics dilemma as Muslims became a majority in the Central Asia that could contribute to the demise of the Soviet Union. Pretty outlandish at the height of the Cold War! Since then, he has been proven quite correct.

Q: You took another two years for a business degree?

COHEN: I graduated Chicago with my M.A. in '78. Six months later I entered an MBA program at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University. An international relations degree, even from the University of Chicago, was not necessarily sufficient to land the right job. The combination of an MBA with an international relations degree from two respected universities would be an excellent platform, I felt. The program at the downtown campus consisted of the usual business curriculum: accounting, organizational behavior, econometrics, statistics, etc. I worked during the day as a bank teller at Water Tower Bank on Michigan Avenue. The bank which no longer exists was just two blocks away from the Kellogg School. I worked at the bank for sixteen months until the summer of 1980 when I quit in order to search more seriously for the right job. I interviewed at Chicago's big commercial and investment banks: First Chicago, Northern Trust, and Continental Illinois. Economic times were soft. Companies and banks were under heavy pressure to hire minorities and women for their junior management programs. I was not making much progress.

On afternoons when the Cubs were in town, I sometimes attended games at Wrigley Field. The Cubs ballpark did not yet have lights; all games were day games. At the time I lived in a garden apartment at 3244 N. Lakewood Ave, just ten blocks from Wrigley. In May 1979, I took Karen, my girlfriend at the time, to her first ballgame. My team, the Phillies were in town. I splurged and purchased box seats by the visiting bullpen. Before the game we exchanged pleasantries with Rawly Eastwick, the last Phillies pitcher on the bullpen bench. I had the great pleasure of watching the Cubs score twenty-two runs that afternoon, and lose! The Phillies won the game in the tenth inning on a Mike Schmidt homerun, their twenty-third run. Eastwick was the winning pitcher!

On weekdays when I was not working or studying, and certainly after I left Water Tower Bank, I frequented Wrigley Field. I listened to Jack Brickhouse, the long-time Cubs broadcaster, on his pre-game show on Chicago's own WGN; Brickhouse had been a customer of the bank, but I suspected he was rarely sober when he showed up. Then, I hopped on my bike and rode to the ballpark. I locked the bike to a parking meter and purchased a bleacher seat. I think it was two dollars. I usually arrived just in time for "The Star Spangled Banner." I still attended evening classes at the Kellogg School. When baseball season ended, too soon, I continued hitting the shoe leather in the search for a good job.

On the afternoon of October 9, 1980, I was in my garden apartment. The telephone rang. "This is the State Department," a woman said. "Can you be in our next Foreign Service class?" I paused for just a second. "Sure, when do I have to be there?" "Come to so-and-so location, Rosslyn, on November 5 for the orientation program." Fine, I said. "We'll send you all the materials by mail so you can prepare."

That was it. That was my call to service in the Foreign Service. I expected the promised packet in the mail containing administrative information. It never arrived. I had no clue what to do. All I had was this phone call and an address, date, and time. I don't remember even having a phone number for them. I was too much of an idiot to call information and get a phone number to call them back. I ended my MBA study at the Kellogg School. I gave away my few possessions I did not think I would need: a bed, a couple of chairs, whatever else I had.

On November 2, a Sunday, I began my drive to Washington. I packed all my possessions that could fit into a Ford Fiesta, which is not much. With everything squeezed into that Fiesta, I began my Foreign Service journey. I knew nothing about storage of effects or per diem. My first night in D.C., I stayed with a caver friend of a caver friend in Springfield, Virginia. Russ was a complete stranger who also happened to be a compulsive neatness freak.

As I drove across Indiana and Ohio, I had a catharsis. The date was Monday, November 3, 1980, the day before the 1980 presidential election. I listened to talk radio, there being no cassette player in the Ford Fiesta. The talking heads on the radio focused on the elections. Callers dialed up to indicate for whom they were voting. By a margin of ten to one, the callers said they were going to vote for Ronald Reagan; it was ten to one for Reagan, at least! I knew then that Reagan would win the election. I reached Washington, Monday afternoon. Tuesday was Election Day, dreary and rainy. Reagan won in a landslide. Wednesday, November 5, was our first day in the Foreign Service. In that era, new officers met at the State Department annex on Kent Street, Rosslyn. (The area is called Rosslyn, the commercial center of Arlington, just across the Potomac River and the Teddy Roosevelt Bridge from Washington, D.C.) The new officers asked numerous questions about expenses, accommodations, and overseas assignments. Quickly, we learned about per diem. Most importantly, we learned you had to spend money in order to claim it. To claim a legitimate lodging expense, I could not stay for free at someone's house. I promptly moved out from Russ' townhouse in Springfield. Along with other new officers, I checked into the Holiday Inn across the street and reserved a room for thirty days. The rate was $48/night.

The Foreign Service Officer (FSO) orientation program is still called the A-100 course. All FSOs go through it. At that time, the A-100 class was held on the 10th floor of State Annex (SA) #3 on Key Boulevard, a couple of blocks up from the Kent Street building. The State Department staff walked around like zombies. Reagan was going to be president! Everyone it seemed was in a state of numbness. During the campaign Reagan had rashly demeaned the government, and by implication government workers, in his run for the presidency. Many believed we might well be the last Foreign Service class for awhile. The sense of unease was palpable. But no one was jumping from the tops of buildings, as far as I could tell.

That was my introduction to the Foreign Service.

Q: Before this, you had taken the Foreign Service exam, had you not?

COHEN: Yes. I took the Foreign Service Written Exam (FSWE) in Chicago, along with other U. of C. colleagues. The written exam was held once a year. I passed the FSWE twice, in 1978 and 1979.

I also took the oral assessment twice. The first time I participated, the candidate's assessment was conducted for one hour in an interrogation-type setting with three senior officers and the candidate. The three assessors sat on three sides. That first time, I did not pass the oral assessment. One hypothetical question I remember flubbing. The question was this: I was assigned to a diplomatic post in Africa. At a reception, a professor of American literature at the local university mentions he will be traveling to the U.S. He wishes to meet some American authors during his visit. Whom do I suggest he meet during his upcoming trip? I rattled off three names. They were the first three authors that came to my mind. I believe I named Philip Roth, Saul Bellows, and perhaps Kurt Vonnegut. Remember, I had come from Chicago. Both Bellow and Roth were local Chicagoans. One of the interviewers asked me why I recommended these particular three writers. I became flustered. I had not expected the simple question. Instead of coming up with a snappy answer, I believe I froze. Afterwards, I said to myself, damn, there goes my candidacy.

Q: By the way, just about that time I was giving the oral exam. I was an assessor. It is one of the questions we used to ask. People would say Huckleberry Finn. And then say well, this man is in Africa!

COHEN: Mark Twain has been dead for close to a century.

Q: But it is just to see how they handle it.

COHEN: Perhaps you were one of my assessors. From working on the Board of Examiners, I know exactly what you mean. Anyway, I had come up with three perfectly good contemporary authors. I should have retorted, "why not?" Or I could have said that these authors are from Chicago and let it stand. Instead, I tried to come up with literary reasons for the authors I selected. That was the wrong direction. I dug a hole and then covered myself up with dirt. So the first time I took the orals, I did not pass.

I took the written exam the following year and again passed. I went back to the orals for the second time. Interesting footnote: Michael Delaney, my friend from U. of C., and I were taking the written exam that Saturday in April. We met very early that morning and breakfasted in Hyde Park at a cafeteria-type place accurately called "See Your Food" on 53rd Street. Michael drove his Fiat. We motored down Lake Shore Drive. "Michael," I said, "you have to turn here to get to the Department of Labor." He said no. "The FSWE is at the Department of wherever on the north side." I was confused. "It says right here on my registration, the address is thus and thus, off Wabash." It turned out we were taking the written test at different testing sites! What a surprise. We had not realized so many people taking the Foreign Service written test. In Chicago, it was being given at two locations, perhaps more. Michael dropped me off. We both passed. Six months later, I took the orals.

That year, the orals were conducted in a fashion similar to the more contemporary format. The assessment took much of a day and included the group exercise and the structured interview. There were six candidates. The group exercise seemed to me to be a piece of cake. I guess my interview went okay. At the end, the interviewers met the group. One assessor asked our group how we felt about the test. I praised the format and compared it favorably to the previous system. I passed, the only one in my group. That was probably late '79. For the next year, after the security interview and the medical, the Foreign Service slipped from my mind. Why worry about it? I just put it aside and went on with my life. I continued at Northwestern University, as I mentioned before. The Foreign Service remained a "foggy dream." That is what I tell people who pass the orals and are awaiting to be called from the roster. Just forget about the Foreign Service until you get the phone call.

Q: Can you give a feel for your A-100 course?

COHEN: We were sworn in on November 7, 1980, my twenty-sixth birthday. The event took place on the Eighth Floor of the State Department, the Ben Franklin Reception Room. I was amazed by the view from the balcony of Washington. The sun was setting over Virginia and gave the sky a web-like pattern of orange clouds. Jets streamed over the Potomac River towards National Airport. Ambassador Roz Ridgeway delivered the induction speech. Ours was the first Foreign Service class after the passage of the 1980 Foreign Service Act. The cycle was turned back. Our class number became 'one,' the first class.

Q: I was in class number one under the old numbering system which occurred in July of '55.

COHEN: We have something in common.

The class before us was the 150th. That's a pretty high number. The 150th class consisted of about 70 people, a huge class. Ours numbered about 27 or 28. As of 2008 one member of our class has made ambassador, a few reached fairly high ranks. Some I still see occasionally. Fabio Saturni is an assessor on the Board of Examiners. Marty Campbell is the dean of the School of Professional Studies at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). I run across others here and there.

My best buddy in A-100 was Larry Walker. We shared the same first name. We both possessed extroverted personalities and enjoyed being single men in town. Larry and I palled around together. Larry was linguistically very competent. When he entered the service, he tested in six languages and took the interpreter's test in four, I believe. In addition to five Romance Languages, he obtained a one-one language score in Chinese. Unlike the rest of us who after the six week A-100 course went into language training, Larry followed consular training with an immediate assignment overseas. So we did not spend much time together after A-100.

Larry and I were both in Mexico for our initial assignments. He served about six years in three posts, including Shenyang, China. But after the State Department personnel system tried to force him into an undesired desk job, Larry got out of D.C. on a Pearson assignment. He went to San Francisco and soon after left the Foreign Service. He worked for the German-American Chamber of Commerce, in California, among other jobs, and married a Chinese filmmaker, Geling Yan. In about 2003, he returned to the Foreign Service. He wound up in Abuja, Nigeria. I sensed he was happy to return to the service. Now he is on assignment in Taiwan.

Q: Was there much attempt at integration, either gender-wise or race-wise?

COHEN: Our A-100 class was fairly well mixed. It still was majority white male, but we had a number of women, probably about a quarter of the class, and at least four African Americans. Out of 27, that is about 15 percent. There was at lease one Hispanic. I never really considered the ethnic make-up of our class. The average age was about 29. Some officers were in their forties. Some were married, but most were single. Our A-100 bid list, the list of possible assignments for our A-100 class consisted mostly of vice consul positions at visa mills in Latin America, Seoul, and Manila. There were a couple jobs in Europe and just two in the Middle East, Dhahran and Riyadh, both in Saudi Arabia. At the time, they were two of the most unattractive Middle East posts that I could think of.

Let me take a step back in time with another interesting vignette. A year or two ears earlier when I was considering the Foreign Service, I knew almost nothing about it. In particular, I had no idea whether being Jewish would prevent me from serving in an Arab country. My godfather, Harold Wolf, had a china and glass shop on High Street in Pottstown. He and Dad were very close. Our families had been intertwined for almost 100 years. Wolf mentioned to my father that perhaps he could assist. "I have a business contact in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, whose son is in the Foreign Service. Why don't you get Larry to write him a letter?" Dad sent me the name and address.

From Chicago I wrote a letter to the embassy in Amman, Jordan. The addressee was the ambassador in Amman. What did I know about ambassadors? I received a very nice reply. The ambassador wrote something like, "I really appreciated your nice letter. Rest assured that being Jewish will not prevent you from serving in the Middle East." The letter was signed, Thomas Pickering, ambassador to Jordan. Neither the name nor the rank meant much to me. But the letter was reassuring and probably helped me make my decision to continue the entrance process.

In 1985, I was stationed in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I traveled to El Salvador and attended an embassy reception. There, I met Pickering, ambassador to that country. I mentioned my letter of six or seven years earlier. Ambassador Pickering said he remembered my letter.

Almost twenty years later, in 2004, Ambassador Pickering and I attended a dinner together at the DCM's residence in Brasilia. I brought up the story again. I said I wanted to relate to something you probably forgot. He replied "oh yes, I remember."

Q: Well, he probably remembered; he has got a very good memory. I am on tape 18- no, actually tape 20 now with Tom Pickering.

Q: So, what did you want to do? Were you coned?

COHEN: I was placed in the economic cone. I presume Personnel read my SF-86, saw that I had attended University of Chicago and probably assumed I knew something about economics!

Q: Yes. What the hell!

COHEN: I did not feel I was an "economist." Anyway, I came in as an economic officer.

We received our list of assignments. On it were visa mills in places like Manila, Mexico City, Bogotï¿½, and Santo Domingo. There was a position in the consulate in Monterrey, Mexico. I had never been to Monterrey; I had never been to Mexico. For that matter, I hadn't been to Texas or west of Missouri. However, I knew some cavers from Texas whom I had met at caving conventions. They possessed a reputation for serious cave exploration in Mexico. Among the American caving community their notoriety and expertise was common knowledge. Many Texas cavers lived around Austin and traveled to Mexico frequently. Mexico possessed major cave systems, deep pits with multiple drops. For a caver, Mexico is one step short of Heaven! In their beat-up pick-up trucks and VW microbuses the Texas cavers drove to Mexico. And there was Monterrey, right in the heart of northeastern Mexico. I surmised that they had to transit Monterrey to get anywhere. This would be my great opportunity to cave in Mexico!

Each of us had to list our six top choices. I put Monterrey number two on my bid list; number one was Dublin, Ireland. Of course, everybody puts Dublin on their bid list. In my A-100 class, only one other person even had Monterrey on their lisand on his list Monterrey was last. It was a no-brainer for the State Department. Basically, I chose Monterrey simply since I figured a bunch of cavers would come through town and take me with them on caving trips!

That was my thinking. Reality was a different story. As a new FSO straight out of A-100, what did I lack? Annual leave! I had no time off accumulated. When the Texas cavers took off on their cave expeditions, they burned at least a week. Some cavers took a month or two off for the really extensive expeditions. My apartment in Monterrey was a convenient rest stop, a transit point for washing clothes and getting a good meal of Monterrey's famous cabrito. For me there were few caving trips.

The A-100 orientation class passed in a blur of speakerthis is before Power point presentationand gin and tonics at restaurants and parties. Fairly often, I awoke hung over. When the $70 per diem rate was reduced after thirty days, a group of us moved to the Oakwood Apartments in Falls Church. After A-100, I studied Spanish at the Foreign Service institute for twenty weeks then took consular training. The $35.00 per diem rate went down again after ninety days, supposedly to $17.50 for much of the rest of my time in D.C.

A year later, long after I had submitted the last voucher for my time in Washington, the Department financial Nazis chased me down and demanded I repay the Department of State $450.00. Why? I asked. We had been instructed to calculate our allowance using the $17.50 figure. Financial management told me the actual per diem level was $12.50. Although authorized by Congress, the higher figure allegedly had not been "promulgated" by the Department. Ninety days times $5.00 a day was $450.00 - a huge amount of money for a junior officer in 1982.

In February 1981 I moved to an apartment in Reston which I shared with two girls who worked in Personnel. Reston seemed like a hundred miles from Rosslyn. Interstate 66 was not yet finished, the Metro ran only as far as the Ballston stop in Arlington. The bus from Reston traveled on the Dulles Access Road to the Beltway, down the Beltway to Springfield, then up I-395 to the Pentagon where I caught Metro. The bus never slowed below 55 miles an hour. Yet the bus trip took almost an hour each way.

By July all training was completed. I departed Washington by car, my beige Volkswagen Rabbit, for Monterrey on July 17. I camped one week at the International Congress of Speleology at Bowling Green, Kentucky, then traveled to Waterloo, Illinois, for another week of camping, caving and historical research at the Monroe County Courthouse. I later wrote an article on the history of Illinois Caverns, the well known cave of the area. In San Antonio, Texas, I received two days of consultations with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. On August 5, mid-afternoon, I reached Monterrey. That day was unusually cleaso I was told by locals. All the surrounding mountains were visible.

Those initial weeks at post, I put up with a lot of headaches. Mexicans seemed stuck in a time warp. I was struck by the materialism and the pollution. Yet, Mexicans also seemed to imitate everything "Gringo" television programs, T-shirts, movies, food, cars, etc. I lived at the Hotel Ancira, a run-down Monterrey landmark, but to me somewhat of a prison. The peso was ridiculously strong at the time and prices were quite high. My housing allowance was $600 a month. That was not enough to find a decent place to live. My colleagues at the consulate were all on their first tour. The majority were single: Jackie Ratner, Fran Thomas, Karen Brown and others. Three days after I arrived, Kevin Richardson married a foreign service national Marikita at the cathedral in Saltillo. Chuck Robertson, Charles Evans, Dan Keller, Roy Chavera, etc., were married. Quite quickly I also realized there were many single female foreign service nationals (FSNs) at the consulate.

Monterrey taught me an important lesson about living abroad. "These people ain't like us!" It struck me a month or so after I arrived. I was being unfairly critical of Mexicans. A friend of mine - an American girl named Virginia who had been teaching English at HYLSA, a local steel factory - witnessed my behavior and attitude. Finally, over dinner one evening she read me the riot act. "It was their culture, their country," she asserted. I had to comply with their rules, not vice-versa. Pretty basic stuff but very important. It was the first, and perhaps most important lesson about living abroad that I ever received.

Q: You were there from when to when?

COHEN: I arrived in Monterey in August 1981 and served there until February 1983.

Q: Who was the consul general?

COHEN: Consul General Frank Tucker was a man who, in my view, had outlived his Foreign Service prime. He was tall, well over six feet, and stocky. He chain smoked and possessed very stained teeth. Tucker kept secluded in his second floor office. In my entire time at the consulate, I remember him visiting the non-immigrant visa (NIV) section once. The immigrant and NIV sections and ACS (American Citizens Services) occupied almost the entire ground floor of the consulate. The consulate had only two floors. From the main entry, steps ascended to the second floor. One could avoid passing the NIV section, but it was tough to ignore the hoards of visa applicants. The one time he deigned to visit us worker bees was while escorting a VIP (very important person) from the embassy. It was either the embassy supervisory Consul General Ruth McLendon or perhaps the DCM (deputy chief of mission.)

Q: Well, it is not quite the same but I spent a year with George Kennan in Belgrade. He never came to the consular section although he had to pass by- we were on the first floor and he was on the third.

COHEN: If he were your consul general, I would be shocked. But at least being the ambassador he had a weak excuse.

Monterrey then had eighteen Foreign Service Officers; twelve were first-tour junior officers. Almost all were on the visa line or adjudicating immigrant visas. Monterrey was very much a JO (junior officer) post. Consular services and visas were the real reason for its existence. We had a consul general who showed no interest even in observing consular operations. Yet, our espirit d'corps was quite good. Work was hard, but when it ended in the afternoon, it was truly over. We hung out together constantly. We dined, had parties, and traveled around northern Mexico and across the border to Laredo and McAllen, Texas. I took friends on short caving trips around Monterrey and into the nearby Sierra Madre Occidental. I visited Larry Walker in Mexico City and he came to Monterrey. We met up with Chris Dell from the second A-100 class who was stationed in Matamoros. Caver friends came south and stayed in my apartment. I went to "Texas Old-timers Reunions" - caving gatherings in Texas. I camped with Texas cavers in wild Bustamante Canyon, about two hours north of Monterrey. I even went to a Grateful Dead concert in Austin, Texas.

Q: What about the consular staff? Who was your supervisor? How did you find it?

COHEN: The FSO who had the most influence on the junior officers, many of whom are still in the Foreign Service, was Consul Larry Rivera. Larry was a savvy, old time consular officer. He was at least sixty, or looked it.

On the admin side, the chief was John Mounotis who was of the same generation as Larry Rivera. Both had been around the Foreign Service a long time. They were joyful to be around. Both were World War II veterans. In fact, Larry and John discovered they both served in the Pacific. At the end of the war in 1945, both were stationed on the same obscure island, possibly in the middle of the Dutch East Indies, although they never met each other. Both would have been on the landing boats in the upcoming invasion of Japan. John told me he appreciated President Truman's decision to drop the atom bomb!

Larry Rivera was very friendly and well-liked. "The secret to being a good consular officer," he once told me, "is to be able to say no and make the applicant walk away with a smile on their face." Larry was great at this. He could say no, but did it in such a way as to extend deep respect and deference. "I really wanted to give the visa, I know you are an honorable person, but other factors prevent me from issuing the visa." Larry made us better consular officers.

In those days, visa work in Monterrey was feast or famine. When the peso was strong, for example during the months immediately after I arrived, and before Christmas, the consular section was packed. The lines snaked out the door. Other days, particularly after the collapse of the peso in the summer of 1982, the waiting room would be quite empty. When I got to Mexico in August 1981, the peso exchange rate was twenty-four to the dollar. It took six weeks for me to find an apartment. The rent was right at the top end of the housing allowance, $600 a month. That did not include utilities for which I would be out of pocket. That was $600 a month for an apartment that was stripped! It consisted of three bedrooms but no light fixtures, curtain rods or curtains, stove, or hot water heater. The consulate provided the washer-drier and the refrigerator. I had to shell out dearly for light fixtures, curtains, and the rest, even the stove and hot water heater. I bought everything and was not reimbursed. Since the peso was so overvalued, these items were not cheap.

I felt lucky to find this apartment. As admin chief, John offered the landlord one year rent in advance, $7,200, if the contract could be written in dollars. The landlord turned us down. He felt he could do better with a peso-denominated contract.

When Mexico's economic crisis hit, I went from being a pauper to being somewhat wealthy from one day to the next. The landlord asked if we would now pay the rent in dollars. The answer was no. The lease stipulated pesos, 15,000 pesos a month. By that time 15,000 pesos had fallen from $600 to about $150. New officers just arriving in country rented palatial mansions, some with swimming pools, for less money than my original rent.

Our workload reflected the mid-1982 collapse of the peso. During good times, it made sense for Mexicans to apply for visas. With a strong peso, grocery prices in Laredo and McAllen were cheap for Mexicans. Once the economy collapsed, our visa denial rate shot up correspondingly.

When I readied to leave Mexico in early 1983, I owned curtains, light fixtures, a stove, and a hot water heater. Because the peso had depreciated so dramatically, I received only pennies on the dollar for these items. No Mexican could touch the prices I really wanted. My first assignment was a wash financially.

I also took it on the chin since I could not go caving as much as I wanted. While caver friends frequently visited, I was unable to take one or two week-long expeditions. I did conduct short one-two day trips to Carvajal, Bustamante Canyon, Cueva de la Boca, and the other caves around Monterrey.

Q: Who were the people coming to you for visas? How did you find dealing with visa work?

COHEN: Our visa denial rate was relatively low. The feeling was, and I think justifiably so, that for most of the time we were there, it made perfect sense for Mexicans to travel to the border towns. U.S. prices along the border were lower than for comparable goods in Mexico. And the quality of goods was far higher. Even for the lower middle class, the cost of a few dollars to go to the border on a bus was affordable. As far as we were concerned, the economic hurdle of the Immigration and Naturalization Act, section 214(b), was not insurmountable for most Mexicans. The bulk of Monterrey's visa applicants were factory workerobreros - or small commerciantes. We interviewed few campesinos; we did not get many small farmers coming to Monterrey which was an industrial town.

Although our visa denial rate was relatively low, we wanted to assist the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) officers at the border. If we had any suspicions about an applicant who otherwise seemed okay, we annotated the visa in a way that the INS officer at the port-of-entry would understand. For example, "brohou" meant "brother in Houston." The vice consuls were issuing visas that specifically said "border." We also felt it important in certain cases to limit visa validity. At the time, the maximum validity for visas was either five years or indefinite.

Issuing maximum validity visas was a meanin the view of the powers that be - of reducing workload. The vice consuls in Monterrey disagreed. We felt that a visa applicant who is young may not be a good visa applicant for the rest of his life! Allowing one entry to America should not automatically allow for an indefinite carte blanche or a five-year visa. There was an implicit understanding with INS at the border that we would do it this way. If the INS officer saw the annotated the visa, he could ask questions to the visitor a certain way. If suspicions persisted, the visa holder could be taken to secondary. We tried to help.

Mexico City did not like this. The embassy was going through its own period of retrenchment. Six or so junior officers adjudicated up to 2,000 or more non-immigrant visas each day. How to reduce workload was their mantra. Consulates were also almost always short staffed. Visa workloads continued to rise. The embassy argued that if an applicant deserved a visa, they deserved the maximum validity visa no matter what. That way, we would not see the visa holder again in a consulate's visa line. However, the Border Patrol and INS might become busier down the road.

We thought this was preposterous and took issue with it. In January 1982, Frank Tucker called a meeting to 'discuss' our use of 'border' visas. Every vice consul, even Joe Salazar, the INS chief in Monterrey spoke in favor of their use. We were fighting a losing battle. A bunch of junior officers going up against the supervisory Consul General in Mexico City, the Ambassador, and perhaps even Washington was not going to change things. In addition, we had a consul general who did care about visas. Frank Tucker's principal visa concern was whether his favorite people got their visas. Morale at the consulate took a hit.

One incident speaks volumes. At the window an applicant appeared who was not qualified for a non-immigrant visa. He was a campesino with no visible means of support. But he had a referral from a Texas congressman, perhaps Kika de la Garza. His visa application said specifically that the applicant was going to Texas to work on a ranch. If I remember, the referral came through the consul general who sent it to the non-immigrant visa section chief, Chuck Robertson, a fellow junior officer. Chuck denied the visa. How could he issue a visa knowing the applicant planned to work in the states? That would violate INA (Immigration & Nationality Act) Section 214(b) which states that every alien is "presumed to be an intending immigrant" until proven otherwise to the consular officer's satisfaction.

Tucker demanded Chuck issue that visa. The applicant appeared again a day later at the window. He possessed a brand new passport since his old passport had been marked with the visa denial annotation. Mexican passports were expensive. No doubt, his padrone footed the bill. When asked, the applicant admitted he intended to work. Chuck wanted to ascertain a bit more about the applicant. He asked basic questions about horse ranching. "Can you tell me what kind of work you are going to do? With what kind of animals will you be working?" The applicant had no clue about the workings of a ranch. He knew nothing about horses or anything else. As ordered, Chuck issued the visa. He annotated the visa precisely with what the applicant said. The visa indicated his intention to work on this ranch in central Texas.

The visa holder reached the border. The INS officer took one look at his passport with the annotated visa and literally rolled off his chair. I met up with INS in Laredo right after this happened. "What is going on with you vice consuls in Monterrey?" they asked me. Of course, the man was denied entry and sent back. Tucker goes ballistic. He orders Chuck again to issue the visa - without any annotations or other tricks! The fellow comes in with a brand new passport again and received his visa. I am certain some well-connected family member in Texas was behind the entire episode.

That was the kind of shit that we took in Monterrey. That kind of pressure forced us to develop close bonds amongst ourselves.

Q: Did you get involved in any protection and welfare type things?

COHEN: Rarely. A couple of occasions are noteworthy. In May 1982 I was assigned for a one month TDY (Temporary Duty) in the consulate in Hermosillo, Sonora. I was making the trip by car. I stopped over in Torreon, Coahuila. The head of the ACS (American Citizen Services) unit asked me to visit a new prisoner in the Torreon jail. I went to the jail and met the police chief. Then I met the prisoner, a scraggly, odoriferous fellow named Steven! There could have been things growing in his hair that had not yet been defined by science. Apparently, the prisoner smelled so bad, the other prisoners, Mexicans all, were complaining. The guy was obviously a bit tinged. The police chief offered to release the prisoner to me if I paid $50 for his transportation to the border. Perhaps, the head of the ACS unit in Monterrey would have approved. But I said no, I was not going to pay $50. Then, the chief asked for $25. No way. I knew a bus ride to El Paso was about $6. "If you want him to go to the border," I said, "you send him." I gave the prisoner a 700 peso restitution loan and he was released.

By the way I served two stints at other consulates. In March 1982, Chris Dell, our colleague in Matamoros, was in a severe car accident while on his way to visit us in Monterrey. His girlfriend Imagen was killed, Chris suffered a severe broken leg. For two weeks, I worked Chris' job at the small consulate there under the consul, Wayne Griffith. That May I went to Hermosillo consulate which was shorthanded. I drove about 2,000 miles in my diesel VW Rabbit and paid only about six dollars for fuel. Diesel in Mexico was highly subsidized and cost one peso ($0.04) per liter.

Another consular adventure occurred when I was the weekend duty officer. I received a phone call from a journalist with The Dallas Morning Call. A highly publicized welfare and whereabouts case had put the spotlight on Mexico. I had little familiarity dealing with journalists. I could not say anything to the journalist about the case. So he asked general questions. I noted something to the effect that when an American crosses the border, constitutional rights are left behind. Which was true; you cannot claim U.S. constitutional protections when in Mexico. I said this and The Dallas Morning Call published it, using my name. I was called on the carpet, but it was nothing compared to what happened with Ron Kramer.

Ron was another junior officer in Monterrey, a former Jesuit priest who married a nun - guy you may want to interview some day. During his tour, Ron went on TDY to run the tiny consulate in Mazatlan, a two-person post. While he was in Mazatlan, an American professor from either Arizona State University or the University of Arizona was driving alone in his SUV (sport utility vehicle) down to Guadalajara. Somewhere near Culiacan in Sinaloa, the professor disappeared. A big search failed to find him. This was in 1982.

Eventually, the vehicle was located in a village in the mountains. The local sheriff was driving it. The professor's clothing was also found, being worn by the sheriff! It was evident, even to the uninformed, what happened. A journalist with Associated Press (AP) contacted Ron and asked for information. The AP quoted Ron that the case exemplified the justice delivered by the stereotypical Georgia sheriff with reflective sunglasses - Southern justice. The quote went out on the wires. The shit hit the fan. The Georgia Sheriff Protective Association got into the act. Washington went nuts. Ron denied that these were his words but the damage was done.

Those were some examples of the nonsense we faced. All of us were inexperienced, a bunch of first tour junior officers with no real instructional supervision. We worked hard. For a while, I held the Monterrey record for the most NIV cases adjudicated in a day, 418. Down in Mexico City, they were up in the 700s. Their record was a different story. Mexico City utilized a pre-screening system which cleaned out good cases quickly. On our busy days, we went straight through from early morning until 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon. After we finished, we would have lunch.

Lunches often were taken at a nearby residence about two blocks from the consulate. The senora cooked typical local food. Usually, a group of maybe six or eight of us lunched there. She placed the food on the table as we walked in the door

Q: Larry, you wanted to finish up about Mexico.

COHEN: Mexico was my first Foreign Service assignment, most of it spent in the NIV and immigrant visa sections. However, for the last four months of my assignment, I served in the Consulate's economic/commercial section. I wrote a few interesting reports, one on Mexico's petro-chemical sector, another on Monterrey's steel industries, still another on Monterrey's chronic water shortages.

Reports were usually drafted on "greens." This was long before computers. Communications equipment in Monterrey was really ancient. The communications machine used ticker tape. Someone mentioned he saw the same equipment in the Smithsonian's Hall of Industry and Technology! I have little doubt that this was true. Another method of conveying reports to Washington was by airgrams. Airgrams went to Washington in the diplomatic pouch, I assume by air, hence the name. Most of what I wrote was not time sensitive.

Q: Airgrams were designed because cable traffic was expensive. You wrote in telegraph-ese but it was sent by pouch.

COHEN: Mexico to Washington was a relatively short pouch run.

I'd like to tell a couple of stories. In late 1982, I escorted some visitors from the Department of Commerce. I took them to Monterrey's famous Cervezeria, the Cuauhtï¿½moc Brewery. The brewery, a Monterrey landmark owned by the Garza Sada family, brewed Bohemia, Tecate, and Carta Blanca; all are among my favorite beers. Another great tasting product, Kloster, came only in a keg. An art museum which belonged to the brewery contained really quality art. We visited the museum and next door took the brewery tour. Afterwards, we sat in the beer garden drinking pitchers of Kloster. It was a great way to pass the afternoon.

We heard sirens. A motorcade pulled up in front of the museum. Police on motorcycles surrounded a huge bus. Everyone, security and all, piled into the museum. We observed everything from perhaps 60 feet away. About 45 minutes later, the pack emerged from the museum. The security personnel were carrying some of the museum's best artwork. They remounted the bus and sped away. The VIP on the bus was Mrs. Lopez Portillo, the president'soon to be former president - wife. The inauguration of Mexico's next president, Miguel de la Madrid, was a week or two away. We had witnessed Mexico's First Lady strip the museum de flagrante of its outstanding pieces. That was a sad saga from the last days of the Lopez Portillo administration.

Q: Oh my God. Yes, later there was quite a thing about her, was there not?

COHEN: Among the pantheon of Mexican presidents, Lopez Portillo was no slouch when it came to corruption. To have committed this flagrant act in front of an American diplomat and visitors from Washington made it extra galling.

The second story I wanted to relate about my Monterrey, tour concerned my pastime which I mentioned earlier, cave exploring. During my 20 months in Monterrey I hosted numerous caving visitors, usually from Texas. They were my friends or became my friends. I occasionally went caving with them.

In July 1982, I met a caving group from Texas at Bustamante Canyon, about two hours north of Monterrey. The town clings to the entrance of the canyon which emerges from the Sierra Madre. It is a beautiful canyon with a running stream. Although the canyon road was a bit rough, the canyon itself possessed nice trees and good camping areas. Except for cavers, Bustamante was pretty much undiscovered and unvisited. High on a mountain along the canyon was a huge cave, Cueva del Palmito. Everyone called it Bustamante Caverns. The Foreign Service Institute's Old Main building could fit inside the main chamber with plenty of room to spare. The ceiling must have been 60 to 80 feet high, the room maybe a few hundred feet wide and 600 to 800 feet long; an immense room. The steep climb to the cave entrance zigzagged uphill through scrawny scrub brush. A trip to Bustamante was a wonderful way to pass time.

My friends and I caved that afternoon, a typically hot day. A group of us emerged early from the cave, the rest remained inside. We hiked down the mountain, built up a good sweat, and drove back to our canyon campsite.

When we left camp that morning, we were the only ones camped in the canyon. We had pitched our tents next to a spring. We got back to the campsite, stripped off our clothes, and jumped into the cool spring. In the interim, a Mexican family set up camp perhaps 30 meters away from both us and the spring. Perhaps while enjoying their beers, they were looking for a bit of action, or trouble. While we skinny dipped in the nice spring waters, the head of the group started shouting obscenities at us. The shouting deteriorated. They took umbrage at our skinny dipping, and probably just our presence. One of the overly macho men started shooting a pistol. That really got our attention. We jumped out of the spring, grabbed our clothes and escaped behind the spring into the brush.

The fear that these drunks might shoot us was not so farfetched. The intimidation seemed to go on interminably. It was getting towards dusk when the rest of our group arrived from Palmito. On their arrival, we emerged from our hiding places. To their everlasting shame some cavers hastily split the scene without investigating what was going on. They departed Bustamante Canyon and drove back to Texas! They even skedaddled with the personal possessions and passports of some who remained behind. The Mexican instigator and two of his cohorts came over from their campsite. I stood between two caver buddies. What ensued was a classic Mexican standoff. I was in the middle, a caver on each side of me. The Mexican with his 22 caliber pistol had a man on each side of him. Three on three, we faced each other, maybe three feet apart. The man with the gun cursed at me in Spanish, pendejo and cabron. He stuck the pistol in my belly. I tried to negotiate our way out of this situation.

Eventually a police car from Bustamante town showed up. We all had to go into town to speak with the police chief. We drove into Bustamante. The police chief spoke first with the Mexican instigator, they obviously knew each other. Then, I met alone with the police chief. He expressed typical indignation with us and put up a show of anger. He tried to be threatening.

Bustamante did not get many visitors. Cavers visiting the canyon brought money to the town. I wanted to reduce the tension and diplomatically exit the scene. But the chief remained very accusatory. Finally, after taking quite a bit of shit, I brought up the subject of the weapon and its being fired. In Mexico, private ownership of weapons is illegal. Everybody in town probably knew who had them. However, to use a firearm publicly and especially to draw it on somebody, on foreigners no less, certainly crossed the line. The police chief called in the guy and chewed him out in front of me. Now, the police chief needed a diplomatic way out of this impasse. He said he still had to fine us for the incident. He said he would fine us each one dollar. There were six of us, six dollars. I said I did not think that was it was right we pay a fine. He asked why not? I replied that instead of paying a fine, the money we collect should go to the upkeep of the dirt road into Bustamante Canyon which was always in very bad shape. The police chief agreed. "We will put the money into fixing the road." We forked over the six dollars and went back to Bustamante Canyon, to a different campsite!

As I mentioned, a group of cavers had skedaddled to Texas without waiting around to see what was happening. They took personal items of the people who were with me, including wallets, passports, and Mexican entry documents. They left their colleagues stranded in Mexico with no travel documents or money. Those cavers without travel papers hid under a bunch of dirty caving equipment and clothes and got out of Mexico that way.

There are numerous caver adventures in Mexico worth retelling.

Q: Was there such a thing as a spelunker's newsletter?

COHEN: Absolutely.

Q: Say these guys are not to be trusted.

COHEN: Among Texas cavers, the Association for Mexican Cave Studies (AMCS) is an umbrella group for all who caved in Mexico. There are numerous chapters, or grottos, of the National Speleological Society (NSS). The Texas caving community publishes a monthly newsletter called the Texas Caver. Soon after the incident, the editor of the Texas Caver, who happened to be one of the people who had fled the scene, published an edition which gave his version of what happened at Bustamante. It was not complimentary of us. On the back cover, the editor placed a picture of an American sitting in a jail. The caption under the picture said "Bustamante 1982." The person sitting in the jail looked a lot like me. This caused a huge stir in Texas amongst the cavers. For years, and even now when we get around a campfire at our annual conventions, we will talk about the Bustamante incident.

Caving has been a fun hobby. I caved in Mexico and continued during my next assignment, Honduras.

Q: Okay, off to Tegucigalpa. You were there from when to when?

COHEN: I arrived in Tegucigalpa in April of '83, left in June of '85.

Q: April 1983; what was the situation in Honduras?

COHEN: When I arrived Ambassador John Negroponte had been there, I believe, for one year. The press called him the "pro-consul." The situation in El Salvador had destabilized to the point of a civil war. Guatemala was also in upheaval. In fact, a Department travel warning about Guatemala prevented me from driving the Inter-American or Pan American Highway through Guatemala to Honduras. It was something I really wanted to do. Nicaragua was controlled by the Sandinistas. The U.S. was ramping up its assistance programs in Honduras and Salvador, as well as covert activity in Salvador and Nicaragua. I was the junior economic officer in a two-person economic section.

The post received plenty of visitors and numerous CODELs (Congressional Delegations). Our military involvement was expanding. The U.S. buildup was in its early stages. USAID had grown dramatically. There were about 60 direct hire employees worked for USAID in 1983/8this is before "contractors" replaced actual pay-rolled employees. The level of Economic Support Funds (ESF) budgeted for Honduras was around $300-400 million dollars. Honduras had a population just over four million. That was a huge level of involvement in a small country.

Q: Your job, you were number two in the economic section?

COHEN: I was the junior officer in a two-officer economic section. My first supervisor was Paul Wackerbarth. He was an outstanding teacher. I long remembered his advice.

Q: I have interviewed Paul. I call him "mon generale" because he did look a little like Charles de Gaulle.

COHEN: And he is tall. Paul also had a good sense of humor. Paul taught me a lesson I found absolutely critical for a reporting officer. "Larry," he said. "When you write a cable, it does not have to be a finished product. It does not need to be a thoroughbred racehorse. You make a draft horse. I will turn it into the thoroughbred." Paul said he needed me to do the tough part, prepare a draft first. When you write a report, get it down on paper. Do not try to edit it yourself to the Nth degree into a finished product. Perfection, he meant, is the enemy of the good. Get out the body of the text and work together to make it a good report.

That was good advice.

Q: Very good advice.

COHEN: The embassy had just installed its first Wang computers. I do not know how many posts had been computerized by 1983. I'm sure not many. We received a few Wang computers. I had not had any training. I suspect the State Department did not even offer training. The first time I sat in front of a computer my first month in Tegucigalpa, I was lost, clueless. Eventually, I mastered the rudimentary aspects of the Wang system. The word processing was nothing like today, nothing like Windows. Cables still needed to be typed. We did not have the ability to save documents. Cables were typed on an IBM Selectric II typewriter with an OCR-readable font. Each page of the document had to be letter perfect.

Q: The cable was fed into an optical reader.

COHEN: The communications unit folks utilized an optical reader. The final report to be cleared by the Ambassador or DCM Shep Lowman had to be letter perfect, no typos. If a typo existed on a page, the entire page had to be retyped. We did a lot of retyping. The State Department was making the painful transition from IBM typewriters to the Wang computer system; we had one foot in each. What an extremely difficult and trying period it was to write simple reports! We constantly had to redraft and fix errors.

As the junior economic officer, I dealt with the country's various sectors: agriculture, energy, aviation, commercial disputes, etc. As Paul use to say, Honduras' economy was overwhelmingly dependent on "dessert" products: bananas, citrus, sugar, coffee, pineapple, tobacco. The country was extremely poor, just as it is today.

Q: On that, the banana plantations, sugar, etc., was this a United Fruit or the equivalent sort of system?

COHEN: The two major U.S. fruit companies in Honduras were Standard Fruit and United Brands. United was based in Tela, on the Caribbean not far from San Pedro Sula. Standard had its plantations around La Ceiba, to the east. The two companies were rivals; both grew bananas, plenty of bananas. Standard had substantial pineapple plantations. I collaborated closely with both companies. In 1984 my new wife, Lourdes or Lulu, and I traveled on a Standard Fruit banana freighter from La Ceiba to Gulfport, Mississippi where the bananas were off-loaded. It was a two day cruise up the humid Gulf of Mexico. The ship was Dutch as was the crew, four passengers, and 100,000 boxes of bananas.

One day Ambassador Negroponte called me in. He said "Larry, I want you to be my eyes and ears over at USAID." Perhaps, he suspected that USAID was off the policy reservation. They had a huge program and, as I said, many employees. God knows how many hundreds of local staff served them. AID occupied five floors of an office building across the street from the embassy. Two floors of the building were occupied by the consular section and the public affairs section. The rest was USAID. It was an enormous operation. Being a young officer, I was intimidated by this directive from the ambassador. There was no way that I could audit everything that USAID did. But I did work closely with the USAID staff. I was friendly with all of them and had a good handle on what they were doing. That also gave me a leg up on understanding how the country functioned.

Q: What sort of government did Honduras have at the time and how did we view it?

COHEN: The Honduran president, elected by popular vote in 1982, was Roberto Suazo Cordoba from the Liberal Party. Before his election, Honduras had a long tradition of coups and authoritarian regimes. It was the prototypical banana republic. President Suazo Cordoba was the first civilian to be elected after the Sandinistas took power next door in Nicaragua.

The real issue, in my view, was not the fact that Suazo Cordoba's was a democratically elected government. The first popular election, I feel, is not as important as the second! That second election answers the question whether the democratic system can self-perpetuate with peaceful transfers of power. The transition from one democratically-elected government to a second is vital. I later witnessed this process in Nigeria. The first election after a military regime or authoritarian system is good but not the critical piece to the puzzle. Can the system survive through the next election? In 1986 when Jose Azcona Hoya, also from the Liberal party, was elected president, it was Honduras' first peaceful transfer of power in thirty years. Suazo Cordoba was the president, and not a very good one at that. But would he be re-elected, voted out of office, or be dumped in a coup? Since our presence in Honduras was so overwhelming, there was little chance for a military coup. It was always a possibility though.

Very early in my assignment, the front office sent me to investigate an incident on the border between Honduras and El Salvador. There had been an attack on the Salvadorian border station at the bridge where the Pan American Highway crosses into Honduras. The bridge reportedly was destroyed. In my Volkswagen Rabbit I drove to El Amatillo on the border. The bridge over the river had been blown and was unusable. The attack occurred a day or two earlier. One could cross on boards placed on the girders of the destroyed bridge. On the other side the Salvador border station was a shambles. I walked across the bridge into El Salvador. I do not remember meeting any border guards. Life seemed semi-normal. I hailed a cab; the cabbie asked where I wanted to go? I said to the nearest town.

Santa Rosa de Lima, in La Union, is in the far eastern part of El Salvador. Where small bridges and culverts had been blown, the cabbie drove across the riverbeds. After about 25 or 30 minutes, we arrived at Santa Rosa de Lima. I wandered around for a few hours. I went to the plaza, had lunch, and actually did a little shopping. I bought El Salvador towels, the type found in Bloomingdales Department Store. I spoke to a few people in the market about what had happened. Nothing seemed much out of the ordinary. I returned to the border in another cab and crossed back into Honduras. I wrote the trip report. I had no appreciation that this area was the heart of Salvadoran rebel activity. I had driven right into it, hung around, and then came right out. People back in the embassy were flabbergasted.

Q: Were the American companies dealing with some of the basic crops targets of dissatisfaction, unhappiness? Were they considered the exploiters?

COHEN: There was some of that, certainly. But in the 1980s, U.S. companies were not as pivotal in the complex Central American situation as they had been in earlier decades. U.S. firms were tangential to the various civil wars then occurring in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Perhaps the companies were still perceived by the local inhabitants as exploiters, but they also provided desperately needed jobs. Labor issues were severe. There was plenty of propaganda and rhetoric. The banana companies were easy targets.

A U.S. mining company - I cannot remember the details - operated the old Rosario Mining Company operations. I worked closely with U.S. tobacco companies. One Kentucky company grew burley leaf tobacco for cigarettes; a second grew Cuban leaf tobacco and produced quality Zino Davidoff Mouton Cadet cigars. Another company manufactured Don Tomas cigars. Although I have never smoked cigarettes, while stationed in Honduras I learned to appreciate good cigars. Ray Guy was the American representative of a tobacco company with operations near the Nicaraguan border. One time his life was threatened by contras or locals. We assisted with his security arrangements.

I never felt that the overall situation in Honduras was quite as bad as made out by the media. On the other hand, rumors abounded. A lot of bad information was fed to the press.

Q: As the economic officer did you get a chance to look at the labor situation?

COHEN: The embassy had a labor attachï¿½, Enrique Perez. I did not have to deal specifically with labor issues. Enrique worked closely with the local AFL-CIO representatives. My interest in labor was tangential: labor as a component of the economy rather than dealing closely with labor leaders.

Q: People who went to Nicaragua from the United States, were most of them hostile to our policy there?

COHEN: I did not see much of that. It was an issue for the embassy in Managua. When I spoke with friends and family members in the U.S., all had their own perceptions of what was going on. In general, and with glaring exceptions, I was supportive of U.S. policy.

Under Ambassador Negroponte, our policy implementation towards Honduras was not bad. He had a tough mission under an aggressive Republican Administration. Clearly, our footprint was huge and we were not deft in how we handled local issues. We overwhelmed the institutional capacity of the Hondurans. I met with the press and occasionally gave interviews. The Ambassador allowed us leeway with the press. In a NPR (National Public Radio) interview, I tried to explain what Honduras was really like in a manner the American audience could understand. I described Honduras as the "Appalachia of Central America." Honduras was the region's poorest, most underdeveloped country - except for how far Nicaragua had sunk by then. In that situation our presence was so overwhelming. We sensed our involvement was not going to be sustained beyond the end of hostilities in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Of course, no one knew the endgame for all the strife. Sure enough, ten years later, Honduras and the rest of Central America had regressed to their traditional backwater status. I just happened to be there at the height of our attention.

Q: Were you aware of the Ollie North, other type of operations that were going on there?

COHEN: No, that was compartmentalized from me. I met some of the contra leaders. I escorted CODELs and STAFFDELs. Everyone wanted to meet Adolfo Calero, the nominal head of the contras. It was part of the route, the dog and pony show.

One time at the airport, perhaps it was in San Pedro Sula, I met Felix Rodriguez. I did not realize then that he was a big operative. Years later, I discovered he and I attended the same school, Perkiomen!

I felt like the Peter Sellers character in the movie Being There.

Q: You mean Zelig.

COHEN: Not sure now. As in Mexico, I had many interesting experiences in Honduras beyond the scope of my job.

I mentioned at length about my interest in cave exploring. A few cavers came down from the United States. Rick Finch, a professor at Tennessee Tech University, Cookeville, Tennessee, also worked as a technical expert for the Direccion General de Minas e Hidrocarburos of the Honduran Government. For years he conducted geological field work in Central America, usually on contract with the oil companies. We became friends and caved together.

In December 1984 Rick organized an expedition to the Mosquitia, the sparsely populated jungle region of northeastern Honduras. During his field work, Rick over-flew a mountainous region of the Mosquitia, the Montanas de Colon, which comprised a folded, highly karstified limestone formation thousands of feet thick. (Karst is the limestone from which caves are formed.) From the air, he observed amazing karst features, such as sinkholes and disappearing streams where cave development might be substantial. Unfortunately, the unbroken jungle canopy prevented any but the most massive land features to be identified. To Rick's knowledge no caver expedition had reached this remote area. Rick's Mosquitia photos showed sinkholes miles across. But because of the thick ground cover, it was impossible to see land features very well.

The purpose of the expedition was to seek caves and cave structures from the ground. We used my house in Tegucigalpa as the base of operations. U.S. cavers Trent Carr, Elwin and Debbie Hannah and Ed Yarborough, friends of Rick's, came down to Honduras to participate. Getting to the Mosquitia was a challenge. There were no roads, pitifully few airstrips. The area Rick targeted required traveling upstream on the Rio Patuca, the major river of the Mosquitia, by dugout canoe. We had to bring everything with us. Rick chartered a four-seat single engine airplane. Since there were six of us in the expedition, the plane had to deliver us in two shifts. For the canoe, we brought an outboard motor and enough fuel for the trip upstream and down. We had food for ten days, tents, caving gear, etc.

We flew from Tegucigalpa's Toncontin Airport to the village of Ahuas. The flight took about an hour. The entire movement took much of the day. At the village we rented a pipante, a dugout canoe 44 feet long and made out of solid mahogany from one tree. The next morning we placed all our gear in this canoe, attached the outboard to the stern, and slowly churned up the Rio Patuca. After the first day on the river we stayed the night in the impoverished Indian hamlet of Wampusirpi. Then we chugged up the river the entire next day. Except for extremely isolated huts along on the river, we saw no one. Eventually, we reached a confluence with a smaller stream that entered from the east, the Sutawala Valley. It was the entry point to the Montanas de Colon, the rugged region Rick had identified for our survey. We set up camp there along a stream and used the canoe as a bridge. For the next five days, we chopped through the foliage and explored the area for caves, large caves.

We camped in a jungle clearing, using large banana leaves on the ground to prevent creating too much mud. We cooked and cleaned in the stream. A narrow muddy trail led off towards Nicaragua. It no doubt was utilized by contras to enter Nicaragua. We saw very few people. Our guide using an ancient rifle provided us with monkey meat which I declined to eat.

Q: Is this where the Mosquito Indians are?

COHEN: Yes. The Mosquitia is well described in the Paul Theroux book The Mosquito Coast. It is a very wild place. We were in its heart. We explored the mountainsides to the south of our camp. Unfortunately, the vegetation was so dense that it was almost impossible to find cave entrances. You literally had to walk across a cave entrance in order to find it. The really promising area for caves rested on the other side of the mountain crest. The elevation climb was a couple of thousand feet through jungle. We could reach the top but did not have enough daylight to go down into the huge sinkholes and return before nightfall. We were just not close enough, unless we set up a second camp farther up the mountain. We never did get to the area that showed the most promise for caves. But it was quite an expedition. Very few people have ever done anything like that.

Q: From time to time we hear about Mosquito Indians being mistreated or ignored or something; what was your impression of that situation?

COHEN: Frankly, I cannot say. I was not following human rights issues closely. The native residents of the Mosquitia certainly were among the poorest, most simple people I have seen in the western hemisphere. A few villages that we passed were barely above the Iron Age. These people had little food; they were out of the Honduran mainstream. We feared for their future. There was talk in Honduras about exploiting the resources of the Mosquitia, particularly the mahogany and other forest products. We sensed that the inhabitants would be pushed aside. Their lives were far from idyllic, but it was theirs to live.

Q: Brushed aside, yes.

COHEN: Yes. After I left Central America, I did not follow the issue closely.

I caved with Peace Corps volunteers, primarily in the Department of Olancho. At the time Honduras had one of the largest Peace Corps programs in the world. Located between Tegucigalpa and the Mosquitia, Olancho was reachable by a recently completed hardtop road. Although it is in Honduras' east, it was called the country's "Wild West." A few Peace Corps volunteers - Beto Santell from Wisconsin was one, Tim Martinson, Roy Schachter, and Bud Welborn were others - worked in the town of Catacamas, a two and a half hour drive from Tegucigalpa. A French caver, Marc Rabaud, whom I met while visiting Roatan Island also joined us. Later, his replacement, Luc Levi-Alvares, caved with us. The caves were a few kilometers northeast of town. We surveyed the caves. Serving as cartographer, I drafted cave maps; eventually, I published the maps in the NSS News (National Speleological Society.) We surveyed one small cave on a hill above a corn field. The cave contained grenade canisters. We assumed they had been placed by the Honduran military to prevent the cave's use as a shelter by the contras.

Most of the caves we explored were known to the locals. There was a significant, complex and beautiful cave called Cueva del Rio Talgua. A stream flowed from the main entrance. To survey the entire cave, we took many caving trips. The cave wound up being just over three kilometers in length. In addition to the main stream passage, a dry section led back to a fifty foot rope drop. Towards the rear of the cave, a wet portion required us to swim. It was a really charming cave, with a little of everything including a few entrances. I published the cave map in the NSS News in May 1986.

In 1994, long after I had departed Honduras, I returned from overseas. I moved into temporary quarters at the Oakwood Apartments. Surprisingly, the phone rang. It was someone in Texas. The caller, a caver, asked if I knew anything about Honduran caves. I said that I did. He explained that some Peace Corps volunteers had made a fascinating discovery in a cave in Honduras. An expedition was being organized to check out this discovery. "What kind of discovery?" I asked. Jade artifacts and crystallized bones! I wished them luck.

A month later I received another phone call, this time from a cave archaeologist from George Washington University. Dr. James Brady thanked me for the information I provided. The discovery was a bone ossuary containing rare proto-Mayan artifacts, found in Cueva del Rio Talgua, the cave we had surveyed. I asked where in the cave? Brady explained that the artifacts were found in a passage above the main stream. We must have walked under the passage a dozen times! The unseen passage was accessible by scaling a chimney just off the passage. The chimney was just wide enough for a tall, lanky person to straddle up. We had never climbed the chimney. From below, I had placed the location of the chimney on our map, but we never climbed it. Ten years later, other Peace Corps volunteers were exploring the cave. They did climb the chimney. Above, they found the bone cache and jade objects. The bones had been calcified by the drip of cave water. A light shining on the bones caused them to sparkle in reflection. The cave was then popularly called "Cave of the Glowing Skulls."

The discovery was big news and not only in archaeological circles. The site was not Mayan but pre-Mayan, a civilization that up to then had not been known. Ironically, the discovery occurred around the same time as a major Paleolithic cave art discovery near Avignon, France. That pushed the discovery at Rio Talgua aside. However, the Honduran discovery did get press in Time magazine. The science section of The New York Times published my cave map. The National Geographic prepared a documentary. At National Geographic Society headquarters, I attended a filmed interview with Dr. Brady. Five months later, the Inter-American Development Bank in collaboration with TACA Airlines and the Honduran government brought the treasures to Washington. They were put them on display at the Bank which hosted a large reception. Professor Brady spoke and showed slides of the cave.

Q: You mentioned you are married. Now, have we talked about that?

COHEN: No we have not.

Q: Can you mention the background of your wife and all that?

COHEN: For that, I have to go back to Monterrey.

Q: Alright.

COHEN: Lourdes, or Lulu, was an employee of the consulate. She was the secretary to the deputy consul general. The consul general was Frank Tucker, the deputy consul general was Jim Budeit. For much of the time I was stationed in Monterrey, Lulu and I went out. We decided to get married after I left Monterrey for my onward assignment in Honduras. We were married on April 15, 1984, a Palm Sunday. The wedding took place at the Hotel Ancira, the very same hotel where I lodged for six weeks upon my arrival in Monterrey in August 1981. Marrying a Mexican was not unusual for male FSOs in Monterreor Mexico for that matter. In addition to Kevin Richardson whom I mentioned earlier, I can name Dan Darrach and Stuart Seldowitz in my Monterrey cohort.

In 1984, I was already stationed in Tegucigalpa. For the wedding, I drove to Guatemala City and flew to Mexico City. I spent four or five days negotiating the bureaucratic obstacle course to obtain a Mexican marriage license. It is no easy matter for a foreigner to marry a Mexican, in Mexico. The paperwork was finalized with the immigration authorities at the Mexico City airport on Friday afternoon. I flew to Monterrey. The wedding was Sunday.

My family was not exactly ecstatic with the marriage of their son, a Jewish boy to a Mexican Catholic. Immediately after the wedding reception, Lulu and I left for the Monterrey airport. We flew on the last evening flight to Mexico City. The onward flight to Guatemala departed very early in the morning so we spent our first night at a forgetful hotel near the airport. For our honeymoon, we stayed one week in Guatemala. We visited the sites: Antigua Guatemala, Lake Atitlan, Quezaltenango, Chichicastenango, and Tikal. Then we drove back to Honduras via Copan and San Pedro Sula.

We departed Monterrey so quickly we did not have the opportunity to open our wedding gifts. The still wrapped gifts were shipped by the consulate to Tegucigalpa along with boxes of Lulu's personal belongings. The consulate general services office (GSO) sent the boxes un-containerized. On each box the packers had written a description of what was inside. After a couple of weeks, the embassy in Tegucigalpa received a message from the embassy in Mexico City. "What do you want us to do with these boxes?" The boxes apparently had arrived in Mexico City from Monterrey and were left forgotten on a tarmac somewhere. Rain had damaged the cartons and some of the items inside. One box was missing. Guess which box? The box with the unopened wedding gifts! Not placing the cardboard boxes within an airfreight container and writing on them descriptions such as cosas de lujo, luxury items, was an invitation for theft. Since the boxes had been left out uncovered on the tarmac in Mexico City, the inevitable happened.

Q: Well, you left Tegucigalpa when?

COHEN: We departed post in June of 1985, the same month that Ambassador Negroponte left.

Q: You say you supported what we were doing. When you left how did you see things in both Nicaragua and El Salvador?

COHEN: Let me take a step back. Rick Finch, my friend whom I mentioned earlier, had the right viewpoint. Rick was very familiar with Central America. He told me about a conversation he had had a few years earlier with Violetta Chamorro, widow of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, the publisher killed by Somoza in 1978. She later became Nicaragua's president. Her husband's assassination sped the fall of Anastasio Somoza and the rise of the Sandinistas. After Chamorro's assassination, Nicaragua's upheavals began. Rick visited Mrs. Chamorro around 1980, perhaps 1981. Violetta Chamorro told Rick that the way to get rid of the Sandinistas was simple. Build up the economies of the other Central American countries, Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, and leave the Sandinistas to their own devices. The regime, she argued, would collapse on its own. That was her simple equation for fixing this mess.

Her formula was essentially correct. Much of what we contributed to in Honduras and elsewhere in Central America was exactly that. By building the economies of the Central American countries, attracting private investment, developing agriculture, etc., the Nicaraguans next door eventually would become discontented living in misery, no matter the regime. Did we do it right? Not really. Were there mistakes? Yes. We screwed up more on the security/military side. Our efforts often not sensitive enough to the people, nor did we sufficiently respect human rights issues. But, ultimately, our heads, if not our hearts, were in the right place. The concept that Mrs. Chamorro enunciated to my friend did in the Sandinistas by the end of the 1980s.

In early 1985, Lulu and I visited Nicaragua. We stayed with a friend of Lulu's, Karen Krueger, who was the embassy personnel officer. We drove around Managua and outside the city. Karen feared that even her car had been bugged. Their poverty reached a depth that did not seem to exist even in Honduras. It was a poverty of lost hope. Restaurants presented menus but had no items on it to serve. To buy the famous Nicaraguan rum, Flor de Cana, an empty bottle and cap had to be returned. Twelve years after its devastating earthquake, Managua remained a shambles. Nicaragua's proximity to its neighbors is analogous to one American state next to another. When a country's GDP (gross domestic product) is collapsing, its citizens no doubt will look next door to what is occurring. In Nicaragua's neighbors, the GNP was rising. The equilibrium cannot remain as is. Things have to change. And, I believe, that is what happened.

Q: John Negroponte, in 2008, is now deputy secretary of state. He has been through many jobs but he has always been dogged by something, I cannot even remember what it was? It happened in Honduras. Do you remember what it was? Were you aware of this?

COHEN: I cannot think of any one incident. You cannot point to one episode of John's Honduran tenure and assert that it tarnishes the rest of his career. President Reagan gave him a challenging assignment. He did it well. The policy belonged to the White House. The press called Ambassador Negroponte the "pro-consul," as I said. In making an omelet, he broke some eggs. He created many enemies, particularly in Congress. However, of all the ambassadors I have served under, he was the most professional. Even in those daythis was his first ambassadorshihe took a special interest in his staff. Morale in the embassy was quite high. I do not know the morale of other posts in the region at the time. It certainly was not high in Managua. There, President Reagan was almost taunting the Sandinistas to attack the embassy and "make my day!" But in Tegucigalpa, we felt we were part of the mission. You have to attribute that, in large measure, to Ambassador Negroponte.

If there is a career regret I have, it occurred at this moment. At a reception at his residence the week of our mutual departure, the Ambassador asked me whether I would be interested in working for him back in Washington. He was returning to Washington to be Assistant Secretary in OES, the Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Scientific Affairs. At the time, I was slated to take six months economics training and the four month mid-level course. Then, in the summer of 1986, I expected an assignment in the Department. I thought that was my career direction. I told John that I appreciated the offer, but I would stick with this economic direction. Had I taken the offer and gone in with him, I would have entered the world of the Department's Seventh Floor nomenclatura. My career would have been quite different.

Lulu and I returned to Washington, to a condo in Arlington. I began FSI's six month economics course in August 1985. Immediately, we were informed that the mid-level course which was to begin in January 1986 was cancelled. A rebellion had occurred in the previous class and, I guess, the Director General believed the complainers. He cancelled the mid level course. Those of us who were to take it had anticipated bidding for an onward assignment for the summer cycle in the summer of 2006. We were unceremoniously thrown onto the winter off-cycle. As you know, fewer jobs are available during the winter cycle. And the timing was too late to find a good job. A few of us were left high and dry. At that point, I should have gone back to work for Ambassador Negroponte. We are getting ahead of ourselves.

Q: When did you leave Honduras?

COHEN: I left in June of '85.

Q: One further question about Honduras; how did you find dealing with the Honduran government?

COHEN: The Honduran Government had the institutional capacity of a typical county government in the U.S. Honduras' economy was far smaller than that of most small U.S. cities, even towns. The talent cream was very thin.

Let me say something about being an economics officer. Quantitative skills for economic officers are important but not essential. An economics officer does not have to be another Milton Friedman. Experts from USAID, the World Bank, the IMF, etc. generate statistics. An economics officer need not calculate GDP or run numbers on a country's economic accounts. Someone else always seems to do this. An officer must understand quantitative data and be able to draw conclusions. In a place like Honduras where the country's institutional capacity was so thin and narrow, you did not have to be a super economist to deal with it. Interpersonal skills, however, are vital. This is an aspect of the job frequently overlooked.

In a society like Honduras' different techniques help build personal relations. One Christmas, I delivered holiday gratuities of Johnny Walker Red to my key contacts. We loaded the back of an embassy Suburban van with bottles of Johnny Walker wrapped in Christmas paper. We drove to the office of each of my key contacts. I delivered to each a bottle of Scotch and wished him or her well for the holiday. That was more important, I believe, than being able to communicate on economic terms.

With Honduran institutions like the Central Bank, I frequently scratched my head and wondered "how did this person get into this job." One Central Bank chief I described in a cable as "smarter than he looks, but dumber than he thinks." Whenever Luis Arreaga who was in USAID and I spoke about that particular official, we would both crack up.

The Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) was negotiated in 1983 and launched soon after. With the CBI, the U.S. sought to augment trade with and investment in the region by negotiating bilateral agreements with each country. Participating countriewhich meant everyone except Nicaragubenefited from reduced or eliminated tariffs on their products and commodities. The countries had to agree to protect intellectual property rights, phase out unfair trade practices, and comply with other obligations. Assembly operations for apparel that otherwise might face quotas or high tariffs were a particularly appealing sector and a few assembly operations started up on the Caribbean coast in a free trade zone. I do not believe the CBI worked as well as it could have. The U.S. sugar lobby, U.S. textile manufacturers, etc, pressured Congress to attach numerous strings to the effort. However, on the whole, the CBI helped these poor countries develop their economies.

I also assisted with the National Bipartisan Commission on Central Americalso known as the Kissinger Commission. The Commission traveled swiftly through the region and spent just one day in each Central American country, again minus Nicaragua. Local leaders met with the commission which took on an imperial air. It was a real dog and pony show! The Commission's eventual report examined the economic and social challenges faced by the Central Americans. Its recommendations, which did not require a huge circus or Washington politicians to discover, did lead to a more bipartisan program of security and development assistance.

By 1983 the U.S. began to expand a military presence in Honduras to counterbalance the perceived weight of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The main U.S. base was JTF-Bravo at Comayagua in the central part of the country, north of Tegucigalpa. In the preliminary negotiations with the Hondurans over base rights issues, I worked with a U.S. lieutenant colonel to address specific questions. Between the Hondurans and U.S. sides, the negotiations occasionally took a bizarre twist. I do not refer to any language barrier. We were speaking in different cultural dimensions! Our side sought duty free entry for PX products such as shaving cream; the Hondurans focused on U.S. procurement of local produce such as tomatoes and watermelonas if U.S. soldiers would go grocery shopping in the local vegetable markets! I'm not sure we ever really understood each other. My interest was to ensure that our presence would not destabilize the local economy. A huge influx of U.S. military could do just that. A skewing of local communities occurred anyway. Prostitution, allegedly, skyrocketed. Planted stories in the press called the problem flor de Vietnam, venereal disease. U.S. soldiers were accused of infecting Honduran women. I believe the stories were planted. That stuff was just unavoidable, I guess.

There were also positive impacts. Money did trickle down. Development did occur. Towns had their roads paved. Communities were electrified. It was two steps forward, one step back. Over time, I think the net result was positive.

Q: When you came back, you took your half-year of economics, which is quite a concentrated and well known course.

COHEN: It was and still is.

Q: But then what?

COHEN: When we were informed that the mid-level course was no longer offered, some of us were in a tight spot. The off cycle was pretty much empty by then. Good jobs were already taken. I visited EB, the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, to inquire what might be available. In 1985, EB was at low ebb. A political appointee, Assistant Secretary Richard McCormick, a former assistant to Republican Senator Jesse Helms, had been in charge since 1982. His competency was open to question. As ever, Senator Helms was super antagonistic towards the State Department and USAID. Under McCormick, EB sunk to its lowest depths within the State Department bureaucracy. The bureau was unable to fill positions, including their two staff assistant slots in the front office which came open in January 1986. I was not thinking about a staff job. However, I did not have much choice.

A classmate from the econ course, Jim Holbein, and I each took one of the EB staff jobs. We served as staff assistants from January 1986 to January 1987. Before I came onboard, McCormick was kicked upstairs to become Undersecretary for Economic Affairs. He was replaced by Doug McMinn. So you had McCormick, then McMinn. When McMinn departed a couple of years later, the new assistant secretary was named McAllister! Doug McMinn was completely different from McCormack. He was not an ideologue. McMinn was thoroughly competent and knew how to work with people. Under him, the bureau started making a recovery. I was both witness to and participant in that recovery.

Q: Were you a special assistant during this time or did you have different jobs?

COHEN: A staff assistants, we were responsible for the bureau's information and paper flow. We kept the memos flowing from the various EB offices through the principal deputy assistant secretary and assistant secretary, then to the Seventh Floor, the most senior leadership of the Department. We checked for the proper format, so important in the State Department. We assured that information from above got properly distributed throughout the bureau and that people who were assigned tasks complied with them on time. The staff job is similar to that in the army. The staff assistant is the gopher, the paper shuffler, the person who makes sure everything is working in the bureau.

While I was a staffer, the bureau received its first facsimile machine. What an innovation! Remember, this is 1986. The fax machine located in the front office was the only one in the bureau. Offices which needed to send a fax to another agency, such as Treasury or Commerce, came to the front office, filled out a form, and sent their fax. The fax machine was a technological marvel that changed the way we did business.

Q: I might put in here because people are going to read this in the future. I am not sure it is even that much of an issue anymore because everything can be done by the computer. Faxes were a readable form of paper sent by telephone to another place. This was big stuff in 1986.

COHEN: It seemed revolutionary, but it really is not when viewed from decades ahead. To deliver a document in real time instead of having to courier or physically carry it was a huge jump in our capability. Today faxes are so ordinary no one would think twice about it.

Q: And the computer has kind of taken over. Did you deal with Richard McCormick?

COHEN: No. When I came onboard Doug McMinn was the assistant secretary. Already by then, the undersecretary for economic affairs was W. Allen Wallis. I believe Wallis had been George Schultz's economics professor. Undersecretary Wallis seemed fair; I did not work with him closely but his staff was first rate. Alan Larson who himself became EB assistant secretary and then undersecretary was Wallis' special assistant. Dick Hecklinger also served in the special assistant position.

During McMinn's tenure, EB recovered much influence lost under McCormick. Jim and I encouraged the assistant secretary to visit the offices and get to know the individual officers. To his credit, McMinn followed through. He raised morale significantly.

Q: Did you get any feel for the relationship of EB with the geographic bureaus?

COHEN: I later served in OES, the Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science, so I have experience in functional bureaus. There was a soft tension between the functional and regional bureaus. EB focused on multilateral issues. Usually, the functional bureaus were quite happy to leave EB to its world. EB officers followed many multilateral institutions and issues which often transcended geographic regions. If issues came up and the geographic bureau felt it was their prerogative, it might try to bully their way past us. The Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs (EUR) was notorious for that. Generally, we were not shoved around very much during my tenure there.

Q: You left there when?

COHEN: I was staff assistant for exactly one year. Eleanor Constable started as the bureau's PDAS, the principal deputy assistant secretary. She was replaced by Denis Lamb. Eleanor was sharp but she had her quirks. Nor was she easy person to work for or with. Denis was a saint; I really enjoyed working with him. With Denis and Doug McMinn in the front office, you could not have asked for a better combination. Freddie Bove whom McMinn brought from outside the Department, was the special assistant. She was also easy going.

I left in January of '87. Since I was already in EB, I had my pick of bureau jobs. I was assigned to the Office of Development Finance (ODF). Shaun Donnelly was the office director. Larry Benedict was his deputy. Other officers in ODF included John Riddle and Maureen Quinn. At the time, I preferred to work on the financial side. The other staff assistant, Jim Holbein, went to the office which handled developed country trade issues. We were replaced by two really great young FSOs, Krishna Urs and Jean Aldridge-Bonilla.

In the Office of Development and Finance, I initially covered the African Development Bank (AfDB). I shifted gears to deal with African issues. I also covered UNCTAD, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

Q: UNCTAD, was this the time when the north-south dialogue or enmity was at its height?

COHEN: If not at its height, then pretty close. There was plenty of enmity. This was during the last two years of the Reagan Administration. The script under President Reagan forced us to dig in our heels in Geneva. "No, and hell no!" UNCTAD and the G-77 pushed an agenda which emphasized resource transfers and more preferential trade doctrine. These positions the USG considered unacceptable. We argued that trade issues should be dealt with within the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.) Our underlying position at UNCTAD was not to talk trade, just development. Instead of "trade and development," from the administration's point of view, UNCTAD was really the United Nations Conference on Development. Trade was shoved aside.

The Uruguay round of trade negotiations was launched in 1986. Assistant Secretary McMinn was heavily engaged. Trade along with debthis is the 1980s, the global debt crisis began with Mexico just a few years earlier - were the bread and butter issues of the bureau. ODF (Office of Development Finance) was not on EB's front plate.

Q: What was your feeling towards the financial side in dealing with countries that needed assistance? Was there much progress or was it pretty much at a standstill?

COHEN: The multilateral institutions, the multilateral banks are important. In the case of the African Development Bank, the African members ran the bank. This led to some questionable loan practices. In 1987 the USG did not possess a high level of confidence in AfDB operations. Some bank loans filled a political agenda more than a development strategy. The U.S. sought to hold the institution to a higher standard. Unfortunately, I am not certain that we ourselves understood what that standard should be.

There were debt initiatives to ameliorate the impact of unserviceable official debt. However, for us, the principle of loan payback was still quite sacrosanct. The debt crisis of the early 1980s which was primarily commercial in nature was fresh in everyone's minds. A number of Africa nations had fallen into deep arrears with the AfDB and with donor governments. The methods for reducing and eradicating these arrears had not been well developed. This era saw the beginnings of serious imposition of environmental considerations in bank lending, a pretty new concept at the time.

Q: What about a country like Zaire which had a lot of money coming in from its own resources. Was it passing out the goodies outside its own borders?

COHEN: I cannot speak for Zaire specifically. Many in the Department know more than I about that country. The African Development Bank was foremost a political institution, then a banking institution. The politics required attention before the banking issues. Also, there was a bureaucratic paradigm that worked against the State Department. State generally assigned its Foreign Service Officers for two years. By the time we really understand the institution and had built personal relationships, we rotated out. Other USG officials at the Treasury Department and elsewhere, representatives of other donor governments, and the Africans enjoyed more longevity with the institution. They knew the portfolio, had the institutional memory. Too often, we were like the junior varsity, the AAA baseball players coming up to the Major Leagues for a cup of coffee in September. It was difficult to crack the starting lineup. I enjoyed working with the African Development Bank. I attended its 1987 annual meeting in Cairo. But I did not cover the beat long enough to become proficient or effective in bank matters.

Q: You say you moved over to-

COHEN: Another portfolio. The Inter-American Development Bank.

Q: There you must have felt a little more at home.

COHEN: I felt very much at home. My wife, Lulu, worked at the bank in the office of the Executive Secretary. She and I interpreted the bank from different perspectives. I could explain U.S. policy towards the bank; she could convey the gossip of who was sleeping with whom! Not a bad good intelligence system.

I attended various Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) meetings. Lulu also attended the same meetings. What an opportunity to go on a mutual assignment. We were in Caracas for replenishment meetings and attended the 1988 IDB annual assembly in Miami. That part of the job was quite satisfying. Moreover, the IDB was ahead of the African Development Bank as far as competency and capability. The Latin American institution was more refined than the African. I do not wish to belittle the AfDB. However, the economic and financial competence in the IDB was superior. Still, the IDB suffered from political intrigue and questionable lending practices as well. The U.S. had more influence and essentially a veto capability at the IDB that did not exist with the AfDB. However, the USG was occasionally frustrated by the bank. We contributed a high percentage of the IDB budget, far higher than the proportion we provided to the AfDB. We controlled key positions in the IDB, including vice president. Still, the Brazilians in collusion with other large Latin member countries really ran the place.

Q: Can you divide who were the main responsible members of the Bank and who were less responsible?

COHEN: The perception was that two countries controlled the bank: the United States and Brazil. There was some truth to that, except that it was not just Brazil. The president of the bank, Antonio Ortiz Mena, was Mexican; he had headed the Bank since 1971. The Mexicans were quite influential; the Argentines were also big players. But Brazil dominated among the borrowers. The United States dominated on the donor side. Brazil was the largest recipient country, we were the largest donor. To get bank business done, the executive directors of the United States and Brazil had to concur. Other countries, eventually, went along. The European members wanted more of a say in bank operations. When they banded together, perhaps they could affect things. I suspect they knew that they operated from a position of weakness.

Some bank lending was controversial. Loans for arguably non-environmentally sound projects, for example, road building in the Amazon, caused much friction. The U.S. questioned extensive lending for tertiary education in countries where not enough support was provided primary or secondary education. We questioned infrastructure projects where no mechanisms were in place to assure sustainability and maintenance.

The issue of replenishment of bank capital came up every few years. This was also true with the AfDB. The banks lent money and repayment lagged over the terms of the lending. Thus, to keep the banks liquid required a constant replenishment of capital from donors. In 1988 another important issue arose at the IDB. Ortiz Mena was retiring. This necessitated the selection of a new bank president. IDB presidents served long periods of time. Thus, the question of successor was vital. The donor countries forwarded their candidates. One candidate was Uruguay's Minister of Foreign Relations, Enrique V. Iglesias. A trained economist, Iglesias also possessed extensive United Nations experience. Some in the Reagan Administration looked askance at Iglesias. Perhaps they believed he was a socialist or whatever. Yet, amongst the candidates nominated, Iglesias seemed to be the most well regarded among the Latin candidates. And no one could complain about a Uruguayan! One evening, I met Iglesias over drinks at the downtown Hyatt Hotel. We discussed the pending selection process. I suggested to Iglesias that if he wanted to be IDB president, he should consider presenting himself to the United States Government.

Afterwards, Iglesias met with senior USG officials and won them over. He talked the talk that they wanted to hear. Although he was not our first candidate, eventually, he received our support and became the IDB president April 1, 1988. He remained president until September 30, 2005. Under him the bank expanded dramatically. From all accounts, he turned out to be a good president for the bank and a true reformer which is what we wanted.

The next time I met Iglesias was in 2002, in Sao Paulo, Brazil, at a conference organized by the Jewish community in Sao Paulo. That is a different story.

Q: Were you there when the great debt crisis occurred in Mexico, Brazil and other places?

COHEN: The debt crisis first hit in 1982. I was in Mexico, ground zero, when the debt crisis erupted.

I was in Mexico when the debt crisis hit; I was in Honduras when during the 1980s; subsequently, I served in India for three democratic changes of government; I worked in Eastern Europe just after the wall came down; I was assigned to Nigeria right after their first democratic government in a generation; and then I went to Brazil just following the election of Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva, the labor party candidate. All this occurred before I went to Afghanistan!

If I had served in Mexico after the debt crisis erupted, it would have been less dramatic. A decade later, Central America had fallen off the radar screen. Nigeria during the repressive Sani Abacha regime was a dead end posting. Before the fall of communism, USG interest in places like Hungary was minimal. I have been fortunate to serve in places that were interesting at the time I was there. At other times, each was a backwater. Mexico had accumulated huge sums of commercial debt. The inability to repay sparked the debt crisis in August 1982. Mexico's Finance Minister Jesus Silva-Herzog declared that Mexico could no longer service its debt. Then, on September 1, 1982, outgoing Mexican President Jose Lopez Portillo announced in his annual State of the Nation address the nationalization of the country's banking system. He cried crocodile tears and accused wealthy Mexicans of ripping the country off by sending billions of dollars to the United States and elsewhere. True, capital flight was serious. But the remedy worsened everything and precipitated the global debt crisis. And President Lopez Portillo was arguably the most corrupt of the bunch. I mentioned earlier his wife's larcenous appropriation of the artwork at the Cuauhtï¿½moc brewery.

Q: You mentioned about how it affected Mexico.

COHEN: Six years later when I worked in ODF, the world had adjusted to the debt crisis. Many countries had suffered dramatic economic collapses. I participated in USAID-led meetings about Zambia which was especially hard hit because of its dependence on copper, a commodity which fell in value dramatically on the world market. Debt issues were handled by a differed office in EB, the Office of Monetary Affairs (OMA). We in ODF dealt with the "lending" side, though we felt the echoes of the debt crisis "big bang." After accumulating debt arrears, borrower countries had a tough time achieving credit worthiness.

Q: What was your impression of bank staff?

COHEN: When I worked with the Inter-American Development Bank?

Q: Yes.

COHEN: Bank staff came from many member countries. The American staff usually came over from the Treasury Department. Some colleagues with whom I worked at Treasury at the end of the Reagan Administration moved into the IDB and became permanent IDB staff. None were incompetent. But by moving to the Inter-American Development Bank, they almost doubled their salaries. Some remain there today.

The level of technical competency at the Bank seemed pretty good. The staff were well educated and in most cases highly motivated. Not all staff thought first of the Bank interests. In some cases, home country demands dominated. Our own presence was not all that different.

Q: You mentioned officials moving over to these international organizations. Once in, they had a home for life.

COHEN: Working life. That is correct.

Q: What was your impression?

COHEN: The people at the multilateral banks considered themselves international civil servants. True, they enjoyed perks. An expatriate working at the Inter-American Development Bank had a high tax free salary, diplomatic status, home leave and R&R (rest and recreation), and paid education for children. It was a great deal. Unfortunately, even though Lulu worked at the Inter-American Development Bank, she was not entitled to these benefits. When she married me and became a U.S. citizen, she was treated as U.S., not foreign staff. She received no home leave or education stipend. The tax breaks were not really significant. Most of the non-U.S. employees, understandably, did not want to move on. In most cases they were quite competent. Perhaps there was a bad apple here and there, just like in any large organization.

Q: You left ODF when?

COHEN: I handled the Inter-American Development Bank portfolio until the end of my assignment in January 1989. It was a good Washington assignment. I learned quite a bit. Shaun Donnelly was a wonderful office director.

Q: Where did you go?

COHEN: I received an assignment as the political/economic consul in Madras, India.

India was far afield from Latin America. We departed in mid-January 1989. Our daughter Rebecca was fourteen months old. Lulu was four months pregnant. We arrived in India on January 19, a couple days before the inauguration of George H.W. Bush.

Q: Madras. Where does Madras fit into the Indian complex?

COHEN: Today, Madras is called Chennai. To those of us who served there, it will always remain Madras.

Madras was one of four U.S. posts in India; Calcutta, Bombay and the capital New Delhi were the other three. Consulate General Madras had a staff of about sixteen Americans and plenty of local staff. More than four million people resided in Madras, a typical teeming South Asian city. Four South Indian states made up our consular district: Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Over 200 million people, perhaps 250 million, lived in southern India. Each of the four states had its own language, its own script. Madras was located in Tamil Nadu. It was notorious as India's "anti-Hindi language" state. The place possessed a colorful political history and outlandish politicians. Characters from Madras' cinema industry including script writers, actors, and actresses, rose to the highest level of state politics.

In Madras, we immediately moved into permanent quarters. The property was called "Marine House." Years earlier, the USG actually had Marines assigned to the consulate. Our house was just two blocks from the consulate. I walked every morning, half a block on Kodambakkam High Road, then turned right on Nungambakkam High Road. I passed underneath Gemini Flyover, one of Madras' most noteworthy highway features. The consulate was next to the flyover. My daily walk was two blocks, but I described it as seven centuries!

Our house was remarkable. It was huge. I estimated it was at least 5,000 square feet. After we had been living in the house for two weeks, I discovered another bathroom!

As I said, we had one small child and another on the way. We had to decide early on whether to have the delivery in India or in the States. Until perhaps 1987, the medical unit at the embassy in New Delhi was quite capable of delivering babies. It had a delivery room. But the practice ended due, we were told, to neo-natal care issues. I assume liability concerns were paramount. We investigated the possibility of having the child delivered in a local Madras clinic. Visits to the local health care facilities dissuaded us. About six weeks before the due date, Lulu and Rebecca returned to the U.S. They took up residence in the State Plaza Hotel, across the street from the State Department. Andrew was born in Fairfax Hospital, the same location as Rebecca. I got back from India about five hours too late on June 16. Andrew was born when I was somewhere over Labrador. We stayed in the hotel for three weeks then returned to Madras via Pan Am. Andrew was pretty young to have flown halfway across the world!

Our Madras lifestyle was very laidback. We enjoyed numerous friendships, both among ex-pats and Indians. We associated with the other consulate Americans less frequently. With a few exceptions, most of our close friends were outside the American community.

Madras is on the southeast coast of India on the Bay of Bengal. An hour drive south of the city, a nice resort called Fisherman's Cove was a popular weekend destination. A resort hotel located on the beach was the perfect atmosphere for an afternoon gathering. The Madras Club was straight out of the British Raj. Although Lulu and I were not formal members, we spent many evenings there. Other consulate Americans lived in U.S.-owned property next to the club.

When we lived in Washington, I had been introduced to soccer. On Monday afternoons at 5:15, about eight or ten ex-pats got together for games on a dirt field. Each Monday, I tried to rush out of the consulate to get to the game. I literally changed my clothes as I am drove to the pitch. The players included a couple of Brits from the Deputy High Commission, Germans, and a Dane or two. We usually played against local Tamil kids about half our size but twice as quick. They ran circles around us at midfield. But our size dominated the corners and we usually won the headers. We probably lost more games than we won, but it was tremendous fun.

We played occasional soccer games against the Russians. The Soviet Union had a large, insular consulate in Madras. It fielded a team with uniforms. On those occasions when we played them, the Russians came out to the pitch en mass by consulate bus. Families usually accompanied. It was all quite regimented and very organized. I do not remember that our wives ever attended, but theirs certainly did. Nor can I recollect when we competed against the Russians any game ending in a score other than a tie. Either we were fairly balanced, or some mysterious political equilibrium had been imposed on us by the Hindu gods!

Q: When I think of Madras, I think of eating an awful lot of vegetarian food, very hot and rich.

COHEN: Quite. Southern India is overwhelmingly vegetarian. Our Lilliputian consulate commissary obtained frozen ground beef from a butcher in Bangalore. We could not buy meat locally. I'm certain the butcher in Bangalore was Muslim. I never developed a taste for Madras cuisine.

On the other hand, I loved Indian food from elsewhere. India's hottest food is served in Andhra Pradesh. Even Indians agree, and they agree on little else, that if you want hot food, go to Hyderabad. I love hot, spicy food. I went to Hyderabad. I ate the Andhra food and concede it was hot, incredibly hot! Absolutely the hottest food I have eaten anywhere on the planet.

Q: I think during the Cold War, particularly early in the Cold War, Kerala was on the front pages all the time of being the red core of India.

COHEN: Kerala was on the southwest coast of India, the Malabar Coast. In 1957 Kerala became the first state in the world to freely elect a communist government. The Communist Party of India (CPI) victory was the first time an opposition party won an Indian state. Later the CPI split and a Marxist party, the CPI(M), was formed.

Kerala is a unique Indian state. The population is almost 100 percent literate. Its rate of population growth is significantly lower, by far, than for any other Indian state. This demonstrates the connection between education and a lower birthrate. Kerala implemented a population policy that was beyond what other Indian states ever attempted. It reduced population growth towards sustainable levels. Compare Kerala to Uttar Pradesh or Bihar where the population growth rates continue to be unsustainable. Kerala is densely populated and tropical. Many, perhaps most, Indians who work in the Persian Gulf come from Kerala. When the first Gulf War hit in the summer of 1990, thousands of Keralans were stranded in the Gulf.

The ancient and exotic town of Cochin, in Kerala was my favorite Indian location. It held special meaning for me. Cochin's tiny Jewish community claimed its roots went back to King Solomon, approximately 3000 years ago. The community described itself as either whitdescendents perhaps of the original Jews from the biblical period and later immigrants form the Middle Easor blacthose natives who had become Jews over the centuries. Most lived in an ancient neighborhood in Old Cochin called Jew Town. In 1947 there were over two thousand Jews in Cochin. When we visited in 1989, there were under one hundred. Most had already immigrated to Israel. The Paradesi (literally, "foreigners") synagogue built in 1568 was a true jewel. On the roof was a clock tower with Hebrew letters. The floor consisted of beautiful eighteenth century Chinese tiles. Everyone had to walk barefoot in the synagogue. A tablet on the outside wall dated from an earlier synagogue from the fourteenth century. In 1990 Lulu and I were invited by Mr. Koder, the community patriarch, for Simhat Torah, the most joyous holiday for the Cochin Jews. A year earlier, I was there for Yom Kippur. Sadly, the Jewish community of Cochin now essentially belongs to history.

Across the lagoon from Cochin is the more modern town of Ernakulam. Small islands dotted the lagoon. Fishermen dried their nets on the beach. We took a small boat around the inland waters.

I also will describe Bangalore, another fascinating place.

Q: Bangalore had not yet turned into the information technology capital of the world.

COHEN: To call Bangalore the IT capital of the world is a slight exaggeration, but it is not far-fetched. In the late 1980s, the information technology revolution was in its nascent stages. Bangalore's IT industry grew from internal and external factors. The Indian Institute of Technology, situated in Bangalore, is India's MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Cal Tech (California Institute of Technology) rolled into one. Other local Indian schools produced high quality engineers and technicians. The workforce was fluent in English and labored at Indian wage scales. For the subcontinent, Bangalore enjoyed a moderate climate. Its elevation was perhaps 3,000, 3,500 feet. Bangalore displayed traits from its British Raj tradition: libraries, restaurants, cultural centers, etc. These factors inspired foreign companies to extend operations to India. At the time, India did not possess a welcoming environment for foreign investment. Commercial investment in India took some guts.

Texas Instruments (TI) was one of the first companies to open a facility in Bangalore. The operation was designed to take advantage of the time difference between India and the U.S. At the end of the workday in Austin, Texas, TI transmitted data telephonically by satellite to Bangalore for processing. The Indian operation downloaded the information, processed it, and retransmitted it back to Texas in time for opening of business there the next day. TI technicians left the office with unprocessed computer program code, came to work with the finished data waiting on their desks. This was the Texas Instruments concept. I cannot say for certain if TI was first. As telecommunications improved, the work became a twenty-four/seven operation. Today, India has multitudes of twenty-four hour call centers. Try getting computer assistance today without speaking with India! Even in 1990, it was clear that these companies were on to something.

Q: Did you feel, particularly with your economic background, that India really had to do something about its protectionist policies?

COHEN: Indian economic and trade policies repressed capitalism and discouraged investment. Government policies inhibited the flow of FDI (foreign direct investment.) For example, the transportation sector had not modernized. Indian streets continued to be clogged with "Ambassador" automobiles. The Ambassador was a British-designed Morris Minor, circa 1957, made by Hindustan Motors. The Ambassador car was shaped like a box, with a large chrome grill and deep fender wells, round headlights, and the old fashion door handles straight out of the early 1950s. The interior dome light switch was a house switch. In 1990, it had not been updated.

Q: An upside down bathtub.

COHEN: Exactly, but not as handsome. In the 1950s the manufacturing factory had been relocated from England when the car was no longer in production to India. No updates had been made to the chassis, the body, or the engine. For four decades Hindustan Motors mass produced these vehicles unchanged. A ride in an Ambassador was time travel. A close analogy in my travel experience was flying in a Honduran DC-3 from La Ceiba to the Caribbean island of Roatan.

At the time, another automobile was just coming on stream in India. The Maruti was a Japanese vehicle made by the Suzuki Corporation, similar to a small Toyota Celica. When you observed Marutis and Ambassadors together, the dichotomy was dramatic. Today, I believe over half of India's passenger vehicle fleet is made up of Maruti-Suzuki autos.

Then there was India's banking system. The banking system had changed minimally from, say, the time of David Copperfield. This was before the era of electronic banking. Modernity had little place in an Indian bureaucrat's or a banker's office. On every desk it seemed ubiquitous piles of documents tied with red ribbons or pinned to keep the pages together gathered dust.

Q: You always think of folders tied up in knots piled high on desks, with coolies running back and forth carrying tea.

COHEN: That's right. That was the bureaucracmanaged by the Indian Civil Service (ICS). I met with members of the Indian Civil Service, a talented and savvy lot. The Indian civil servants with whom I dealt were highly educated and competent. Competition to enter India's civil service was severe. Only the best, and I assume well connected, made it into the ICS. I sensed, however, that most of my interlocutors failed to appreciate the preposterousness of the bureaucracy for which they labored, these gross systemic inefficiencies. These were the days before desktop computers. But when it came to information management, the United States was light years ahead of India. India's bureaucratic system kept the nation looking backwards.

India's power sector exemplified gross inefficiency. State electricity boards delivered electricity almost free to farmers. The nominal charge was, if I remember, under a penny per kilowatt hour. Of course, there were no meters. For pumping water to the fields, electricity was critical for Indian agriculture. While there was a political rationale and logic to assist poor villagers, there was no incentive to conserve power usage. Farmers pumped away to their hearts' content. Throughout the country, millions of pumps in half a million villages consumed enormous power, an enormous drain on India's fragile electricity grid. And the grid constantly went down.

If farmers were not paying for electricity, then who was? India's power generation was heavily subsidized. India desperately needed investment in the power sector. But who would invest in a sector where so much production was given away? Without a stable power supply, how could India attract investment into other economic sectors? Without industrialization, where were the new jobs for the children of the farmers? It was a snowball effect. Many Indians recognized a problem existed. India had a tough time getting over that hurdle.

A few months after we departed post, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated on May 21, 1991. After his death, India's fundamental economic policies changed radically.

Q: Speaking of the assassination, it was tied to the Tamil situation there. During your time what was the Tamil situation?

COHEN: India served as haven for thousands of Tamil refugees. The Tamils in Tamil Nadu state shared a common ethnicity and bond with their kin across the Palk Straits. There was local sympathy and support for Tamil refugees who were living in camps throughout the state. I occasionally met local Tamil leaders who spoke on behalf of Tamils in Sri Lanka. I do not recollect specifically meeting representatives of Prabhakaran's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers). Not a few people in Madras were affiliated with the Tamil Tigers. However, there was no overwhelming local support for Prabhakaran's brutal methods.

During the late 1980s the Indian military had a presence in Sri Lanka. The IPKF, the Indian Peace Keeping Force, introduced in 1987 under the terms of a peace accord between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government, had a challenging assignment. Some equated the IPKF's supposed debacle in Sri Lanka to Vietnam. That was a tremendous exaggeration. The Indian Government was smart enough not to let the situation slip completely out of its hands. The Indian military remained careful about its role in Sri Lanka. With the election of the V.P. Singh government in 1989, the troops were gradually pulled out. The last soldiers left in March 1990.

The Indian navy was quite active in the Bay of Bengal. The Indian Government held high aspirations for its navy which it hoped would truly become a blue water extension of India's regional power. I was reminded on occasion that the body of water was referred to as the "Indian Ocean."

Tamil Nadu faced enough problems on its own and most civilians were not compulsive about events in Sri Lanka. The refugees living in the camps were not in great shape. However, refugee camps elsewhere on the planet were in worse condition.

Q: What were you doing at the consulate general? What was our main concern other than reporting?

COHEN: I was consul for political and economic affairs. Indians take democracy seriously. I met constantly with provincial politicians. Elections, it seemed, were occurring every month somewhere in our consular district! The election process never ended. The country's electoral politics were uniquely colorful - somewhat raw but absolutely vibrant.

With the invaluable efforts of the consulate's foreign service nationals (FSNs): K. Prabhakaram Nair, C.S. Madhava Rao, R. Natarajan, and Lalitha Natraj, I covered south Indian political economic and social issues. Earlier I mentioned Kerala's population policy. The nuclear sector drew my attention. India's counterpart to Cape Canaveral, Sriharikota, is located in Andhra Pradesh just north of Madras. I reported on the nuclear power generating plant at Kalpakkam, south of Madras, and not far from the temples at Mahaballapuram. I reported on India's industrialization and its manufacturing sector, for example, the Vizag Steel mill in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. In coordination with the Foreign Commercial Service staff, I addressed commercial issues in Bangalore and other cities. For about six months, I headed the commercial section.

The Tamil situation, the refugees, the Indian navy's quest to establish a blue water presence in the Indian Ocean, the occasional visitors who came to Madral had plenty to do.

I sensed our performance in Madras was somewhat underappreciated. On one trip to the embassy in New Delhi, I noticed a new group meritorious honor award for the political section. The citation cited the outstanding embassy reporting during a recent national election. I was taken aback. Embassy policy required the consulates to feed all their election reporting to the embassy. The political section essentially regurgitated the consulate insight to the Department. We could not send our election reporting directly to Washington. Reading the award on the wall of the political section, I resented that the section recognized itself with such an award but neglected the three consulates which fed it much of the information. Madras' four FSNs had worked diligently on election reporting. "How can you award yourselves a meritorious honor award and not recognize the work of the consulates?" I asked. Soon, we got the same award for the consulate staff.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

COHEN: John R. Hubbard, a political appointee. Ambassador Hubbard was a Texan who had been President of the University of Southern California. The political counselor was George Sherman.

Q: Who was the consul general?

COHEN: Early in my tour it was Tom Timmerman. He was succeeded by Ernestine (Ernie) Heck, wife of former Ambassador Doug Heck. At the time Ambassador Heck was an invalid with Parkinson's. He lived at the consul general's residence with constant medical care. We never saw him, he never emerged from the residence, and I am certain it was very tough on Ernie. At least she was a competent consul general. Timmerman was not as effective.

India was a combination of all the best things you would want in a Foreign Service career.

Q: Did you feel any reflection of the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989? The Soviets had been the big ally of India and all of a sudden, it was gone. Were you there at the beginning of the Gulf War?

COHEN: Yes and yes. We were distant from events going on in Europe and the fall of communism. On the other hand, we enjoyed a front row seat for how those events affected India. I will mention our relations with the Russians in Madras. As I mentioned, the Russians had a large consulate, much larger than ours. We had some, albeit limited, social intercourse with them. After the fall of the Wall, one Russian diplomat in particular who was part of their intelligence service, played up the "friendship" part. He said he had served in the United States; that was believable since he spoke impeccably unaccented American English. He became our so-called "friend," "There were no real winners or losers in the Cold War," he argued. Both sides were winners, etcetera. Perhaps that was the perception that the Russians wanted to foster.

Among the Indians, the collapse of communism did not play dramatically. True, India had been a long time Soviet ally. But there was never an ideological bond, except for the communist parties. However, communism in India, the active Marxist parties in our consular district, did not seem dramatically affected by the fall of the Wall.

Q: Okay. The Gulf War started in August of 1990.

COHEN: Yes. The Persian Gulf was much closer to our playing field than Berlin. The weekend before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the last Saturday night in July, we attended a big social event at the Madras Club. At least a hundred fifty people were there. The ubiquitous raffle took place in the large hall. Lulu and I were sitting outside with friends on the lawn, not paying attention to what was going on inside. We heard this commotion. Someone came out and told me I won the grand prize. "What are you talking about?" "Your name was pulled from the raffle, you won the raffle prize." I went inside to collect it. At this point I still did not know what the raffle prize was.

Q: Probably a trip to Kuwait or something.

COHEN: Good guess. I went inside. Everyone is staring at me. I collected a club class roundtrip ticket on British Airways from Madras to London via Kuwait. Less than 48 hours later Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. One of the first acts of his invasion, of course, was to detain a British Airways jetliner which was transiting Kuwait. It was the London-Madras-Kuala Lumpur flight, the flight on which I had just won a seat!

The Iraqis held the hostages for months. I do not remember the duration. We were monitoring events in the Middle East from the consulate. We watched CNN in the consulate auditorium. CNN was still a new medium for news. The network showed video clips of the passengers who were on that flight. They had been moved to Baghdad to serve, allegedly, as human shields. Many faces of Madras residents were familiar to people watching in the audience. Someone would call out, "Oh, there is so-and-so, oh, there is so-and-so."

After some time, it was obvious the situation was not going to be resolved quickly. I visited the British Airways office with my raffle prize letter. I asked if I could exchange the ticket. No problem. I turned in my one club class ticket to London for two club class tickets Madras-Kuala Lumpur. Lulu and I traveled to Malaysia for vacation.

From a substantive point of view, Southern Indians focused on the thousands of Indian workers who were stranded in Kuwait and throughout the Gulf.

Q: Everything that happens in India is sort of regional. Were the workers essentially from your part of India?

COHEN: The majority came from the state of Kerala, on India's southwest, Malabar Coast. I explained earlier that Keralans tend to be more highly educated and sophisticated than other Indians. Many thousands migrated to the Persian Gulf and became laborers. I am sure many stranded workers were from Bombay, Maharashtra, etc. But Kerala was overwhelmingly the home for most. The Indian Government mounted a massive relief effort to bring back the stranded workers.

I was responsible for reporting the situation in Kerala. Initially, the Gulf War perspective focused on the repatriation of these people. Most were successfully repatriated back to India. In Kerala, a potential human catastrophe was averted. However, the economic consequences from the lost Gulf worker remittances were severe.

Q: Did you have much of an Islamic presence in your area?

COHEN: We did. Obviously, Saddam Hussein and Iraq is a part of the Arab world. One Muslim country attacked another Muslim country. There was no love lost, among Indians, for Saddam Hussein. Initially, there was a slight Islamic tilt to the news. Andhra Pradesh contains a large Muslim minority population. Its capital, Hyderabad, is largely Muslim. The other states, including Karnataka and Kerala, had significant Muslim minorities. To my recollection, there were no major domestic problems with regards to those populations. South India was relatively tolerant towards Muslims

Q: How about the media? Did they take any particular fix on this war?

COHEN: The Indian media is very buoyant, often outrageous and consistently outspoken. The media pushed the GOI for repatriation of the stranded workers in the Persian Gulf. During the crisis their criticism of the United States was relatively muted. This occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Cold War had almost ceased to exist by this point. U.S. support for Pakistan dissipated with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989. Anti-Americanism in India was pretty much at low ebb.

Q: Did you find that the Indian people got involved as so many did in the United States and elsewhere with CNN, watching the war.

COHEN: Southern India in 1990 did not have an extensive information network beyond state run television and the written press. CNN was not easily accessible, except perhaps in the fancier hotels. Satellite dishes were non-existent. There was no cable system at the time. The consulate had a fax machine but the faxes generally were poor quality. Sending or receiving a fax was an ordeal and the copy often unreadable. The consulate did have access to the USIS international television service, called WorldNet. CNN was a new medium. At our residences, forget it. Each residence had a phone, a heavy black box with an earpiece the size of a tennis ball. To call the states or anywhere beyond Madras, the caller reserved a call hours in advance. To book a call, I contacted the operator and provided the number in the United States. Even the operator sounded like she was on the moon. The operator informed us when the call back could be expected, usually a few hours. For this wonderful service, long distance phone charges were incredibly steep, something like $6 a minute to the U.S. This was in 1990! India did not have telecom deregulation.

India's print media was a different story. India's vibrant press, both in the vernacular and English, covered the war widely. Thus, much of our international news came from Indian newspapers. The International Herald Tribune arrived almost a week late; Newsweek magazine came irregularly. We were near the end of the information chain, or so it seemed.

Q: Was there anything particularly threatening to the consulate during the Gulf War?

COHEN: There were two parts to the Gulf War: Desert Shield and then Desert Storm.

Q: Desert Shield being the buildup to Desert Storm.

COHEN: Correct. On January 17, 1991, Operation Desert Storm was launched, the actual attack then invasion of Iraq and liberation of Kuwait. We departed India in February. During Desert Shield, security was beefed up slightly at the consulate. From a physical security standpoint, the consulate is not very defensible. Although the consulate sits within a large compound with a wall around it, there is no setback from Gemini flyover, one of Madras's busiest traffic areas. There was little protection from serious demonstrations. Only very small, minor demonstrations took place.

Q: Were you all given instructions to go out and explain what we were doing and why we were doing it?

COHEN: That was part of my job. I spoke with Indian audiences, generally on topics not necessarily related to the Gulf War. But the situation in the Persian Gulf always came up. I delivered talks to Rotary clubs, often on trade issues. I answered questions about U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf. With Indian audiences, I kept the dialogue low key. Just below the surface, many Indians possessed resentment against us. Perhaps it was the residual of so many years of India's anti-U.S. foreign policy following perceived U.S. favoritism for Pakistan. A preaching American diplomat was not how I wanted to be portrayed.

Q: As I recall the Indians played a more positive role than would appear on the surface.

COHEN: Absolutely. The GOI allowed military over-flights, provided clearance to U.S. support missions. India also has a significant navy -

Q: Quite a significant navy.

COHEN: For the region yes. As I said, India aspired to create a real blue water navy, one that would extend India's reach from Africa to Australia, and perhaps beyond. They have had mixed success. But Indians liked to remind people that the body of water nearby was called the "Indian Ocean." Our operating base out of Diego Garcia, south of the Indian sub-continent, and our nearby fleets including additional aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf rubbed Indian sensitivities the wrong way. I was not involved in this, but I recollect that the Indian and U.S. navies collaborated fairly well during the Gulf War.

Q: Regarding trade, I am not sure if we covered this before but one of the problems that existed with India for a very long was India's protected trade environment.

COHEN: I was stationed in India just before the liberalization of the economy. At that time, a keen observer may have sensed that the impetus for liberalizing the economy had reached a crossroads. The country was moving slowly, but undeniable momentum was starting to build. Think of a roller coaster as it reaches the crest moments before the rapid ride down. Three months after we left, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. Under Gandhi, India had almost reached the crest of the roller coaster. Under his successors, that roller coaster accelerated down swiftly.

Q: We are talking the roller coaster being -

COHEN: Economic reform, trade liberalization, the opening of the country to foreign direct investment. India exhibited many contradictions that could not really be easily rectified. As I mentioned banking was stuck in the 19th century. Auto manufacturing could not get past the 1950s. The antipathy to foreign investment hurt no one more than the Indian people. These self-inflicted wounds could not last forever. Primitive technologies were being utilized next to cutting edge technologies. A huge uneducated mass of humanity co-existed with a few of the world's best institutes of technology and science. Parts of the economy were ready to take off; other parts were hardly removed from antiquity. It could not last; something had to give.

Q: One thinks of Indian villages and the sacred cows wandering around. What was your feeling how was this going to come out?

COHEN: As a diplomat, one usually does not have opportunities to speak to a very broad population. A diplomat generally communicates with the elites, contacts, journalists, politicians, businessmen. The folks with whom I spoke were already on that roller coaster. Many were cognizant that India needed to get on the roller coaster glide path or suffer. China at this time was already perking forward in impressive fashion. Foreign investment was starting to flow to China but not to India. I talked about trade and about the GATT -

Q: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

COHEN: I spoke about trade liberalization and opening India's economy. The country had great potential to utilize foreign direct investment. India did not have to depend solely on self-generated capital and resources. Massive foreign investment would come to India if the building blocks were in place. The first sector to address was telecommunications. This was before the cell phone era, but potential existed in satellite telecommunications. Eventually, other sectors such as banking and finance attracted investment. Suzuki began to manufacture Maruti automobiles which were increasingly common. A few years later, everything had changed in India. The country had reached takeoff.

Q: You left about four months before Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. This was by a Tamil who blew himself up. It happened in your consulate district.

COHEN: It happened thirty kilometers from Madras. It was a suicide bomber from the LTTE. Given India's role in Sri Lankan peacekeeping, the threat of Tamil extremism directed against the government had been obvious. Perhaps, it was not taken seriously enough, because the problems in Sri Lanka had already been going on a long time.

Q: Sri Lanka.

COHEN: The Indian Government was extensively engaged there, but not in a heavy-handed manner. Moreover, Tamils from Sri Lanka, outside refugee camps, tended to enjoy free reign in Tamil Nadu. Despite the attacks on Indian soldiers in the IPKF, the Tamil Tigers and their sympathizers were not hunted down or persecuted in India. They operated quite freely in southern India for a long time. A Tamil Tiger attack on the Indian Government of such magnitude is an example of biting the hand that feeds you. But there was nothing logical about the Liberations Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which later denied involvement in the killing.

When I first heard about the assassination, I was already at my next post. Initially, I did not believe it was a Tamil Tiger attack. It was so obvious as to be counterintuitive. Although the LTTE had enjoyed the largesse of the Indian government, it was perfectly capable of such an attack.

Q: Did you from accounts and personal contact get any feel that this was a renegade outfit?

COHEN: I do not know. These guys were thugs. I sensed the LTTE was a very cohesive group. Prabhakaran, the Tamil Tiger chief, seemed to have a fairly tight hold on operations. On the other hand, there were disparate groups. Communications were not easy amongst these groups; there were no cell phones. I doubt they used radios that the Indians could monitor. It was possible that groups out there had their own agendas. I was surprised by the assassination. In hindsight, I should not have been.

Tamil Nadu, on the southeast corner of India, has always been a very self-centered region. Tamil, I understand, is the oldest language on the Indian subcontinent. It is one of the world's oldest continually spoken languages. South Indian civilization, Dravidian India, is quite different from that in the Mogul north. Southern India was never conquered by the Moguls, had never come under Muslim domination. It was old Hindu, a traditionally religious part of the country with many ornate temples. The Tamils were viscerally anti-Hindi. Tamil Nadu was arguably the most "anti-center" of all Indian states. The anti-Hindi movement contributed to great usage of English among Tamils who insisted on learning English rather than Hindi. There was broader literacy in English than in Hindi. New Delhi promoted Hindi as the national unifying language. Yet, I do not remember much Hindi programming in Madras. It was never written on signs. If not Tamil, signs were exclusively in English. Politicians in Tamil Nadu used Tamil ethnic identity to promote their own ends.

Q: Did you find in your consular district an important role for religion?

COHEN: The Muslim population was relatively small, although in Indian standards, relatively small means only tens of millions versus hundreds of millions. There were significant Muslim pockets throughout the consular district, especially Hyderabad. Hinduism and Hindu culture was more than just a religion; it was the fabric of society woven together and impossible to differentiate. I cannot identify where religion began and other parts of society ended.

Parts of the district possessed especially heightened Hindu identity. We witnessed the growth of very nationalistic Hindu political parties, such as the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) or the most radical of the groupings, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). The RSS was somewhat like the John Birch Society, the LaRouches of the Hindi identify movement.

Q: Sort of an extreme right wing party.

COHEN: Very extreme. The BJP was more main stream than the RSS party but still quite intolerant towards Muslims. For years, they fed off the crumbs from the Congress Party's table. Eventually, in 1989, the BJP won a national election. The RSS was the extreme right.

Another Hindu-Muslim event was playing out, the controversy over a mosque in northern India at Ayodhya. Although not in our consular district, Ayodhya nonetheless had become a huge issue throughout India. Ayodhya was considered the birthplace of the Hindu God Shri Ram. Four centuries earlier, the Hindu temple at the site had been converted into the Babri mosque by the Emperor Babar. It was not a significant mosque. However, the Hindu zealots played it up. The Hindu population was riled up. The government faced a dilemma. In 1992, the dam broke. A Hindu mob stormed the mosque and destroyed it. That could have catalyzed the beginning of a very bitter, almost 1947-like catastrophe. Fortunately, India dodged the bullet. The Muslim population was not looking for trouble. But that was a close call.

Q: Were you in India at the time?

COHEN: We had left India the year before.

Q: Were you looking at mosque attacks or mobs? Could mobs be generated rather easily?

COHEN: In southern India, Muslim-Hindu tension was less severe. On the contrary, the people with whom I dealt emphasized that south India was relatively tolerant. Much more tolerant, it was obvious, than the Hindi belt where Ayodhya is located. The Hindi belt consists of the northern states, particularly highly populous UP (Uttar Pradesh). Northern India contains the most impoverished regions of the country. True, ethnic and other tensions existed throughout southern India. In many cases, the divisions had to do with land and water. India enjoys few rivers and is a very crowded country. Land and water disputes, between states, tribes and ethnic groups, produced a constant cauldron of strife.

Q: Just to get a feel for consular operations there; were you keeping book on the religious map, the water map, the land map, the disputes and all?

COHEN: I was responsible for observing, analyzing and reporting on events such as I described. The breadth of the issues consisted of traditional political, economic, and social issues. What, for example, were the implications for instituting actual cost pricing for electricity in rural areas? What would this mean for Indian farmers? As with water, electricity was a very sensitive issue in India. I looked at the region's pollution problems. We observed the early emergence of a perception of India's environmental challenges. I looked at population issues, especially, as I said, in Kerala. These social issues were an important component of my portfolio.

Q: Were there any characters or elections, colorful Indian types, who particularly stand out?

COHEN: There were many. Madras is very much a movie city, the counterpart to Bombay's "Bollywood." It was quite amazing how leading movie actors took over local politics. Of course, this was just after the Reagan Administration. What could we say when it came to movie actors becoming politicians? Yet, the incestuous relationship between movie magnates and actors and control of Tamil political mechanisms was quite amazing. The movie actors who moved into politics made my job truly entertaining.

One major movie figure in Tamil Nadu was an idolized film star named M.G. Ramachandran (MGR). Everyone referred to him as MGR. He headed the AIADMK party, an offshoot of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party founded by Tamil Nadu patriarch C.K. Annadurai. As Chief Minister, MGR became almost a god in Tamil Nadu. That was fitting since in his Madras movie career he played god parts. At MGR's death in December 1987, a year before we arrived, dozens of people reportedly flung themselves on his funeral pyre. His principal rival was Muthuvel Karunanidhi, head of the DMK party since Annadurai's 1969 death and multiple times chief minister of the state. MGR and Karunanidhi had parted company in 1974. Although I never met MGR, I perceived similarities with his rival. In addition to being capable Tamil politicians, the two wore dark sunglasses all the time, no matter how dark the room. Both always wore distinctive hats. The sunglasses and hats lent each a mysterious air and contributed, I am sure, to their popularity among the masses.

After MGR's death in 1989 there was a four-way battle for the governorship of Tamil Nadu. Four candidates sought to fill MGR's throne, so to speak. One candidate was MGR's widow but she was a non-entity. MGR's mercurial mistress, Jayaram Jayalalitha, was more politically savvy, colorful in her own right. She had been an actress and played parts opposite the god character of MGR. She was popular, but at that time she did not yet possess the necessary political machinery behind her. The Congress Party ran a candidate but it was a hopelessly uphill effort for Congress in Tamil Nadu at the time. Congress could not take Tamil Nadu in those years. Karunanidhi who had been chief minister twice before in the 1970s, was formidable. In the four candidate horse race, Karunanidhi was easily elected chief minister.

Throughout southern India, huge billboards, perhaps 30 feet tall, portrayed profiles of the leading political figures, figuratively larger than life. Wooden billboards were used to advertise movies. Since actors and the politicians were often one and the same, Indians likely saw no incongruity in viewing their movie heroes as politicians. It was no wonder actors became leading political figures. I will add a footnote. Months after the inauguration of President George H.W. Bush in 1989, Consul General Tom Timmerman decided the Consulate would honor the president with his own movie board! It was commissioned and placed on the consulate grounds overlooking Gemini Flyover which, as I mentioned, was one of Madras' busiest thoroughfares. Imagine a pallid, five times larger than life, George Bush (senior) looking over the city's minions. I thought the entire episode overly pretentious. The board was moved to the CG's residence, in time for July 4th.

I believe that before politics, Karunanidhi had been a movie scriptwriter. Karunanidhi was, and still is a fascinating character. He again won the chief ministership in May 2006, at age eighty-two! His own personal history remains inexorably linked with Tamil identity. While all powerful in Tamil Nadu for two generations, Karunanidhi, in my view, was never a major influence on the national scene. During my period in Madras, he was grooming his youngest son, M.K. Stalin, to be his political heir. Who names a child Stalin? I guess M.K.'s birth, coinciding almost to the day that the Soviet dictator died in 1953, was seen as portentous. Although Stalin was elected to the legislative assembly and served a term as Madras mayor, I doubt he possesses a fraction of the old man's political capability. So it goes. However, he was, and I assume still is very cunning, Mafioso-type figure. I disliked him.

Later, Jayalalitha, MGR's heir to the AIADMK mantle, succeeded in building her political base. She was manipulative and exploitative. I met her privately in her home where she turned on her political charms. After we departed post in 1991 she defeated Karunanidhi and became Tamil Nadu chief minister. For the next decade and a half, she and Karunanidhi vied back and forth, one defeating the other, as chief minister. The pattern was identical. Each charged the other with corruption. The charges never stuck longer than an election cycle. When Karunanidhi won back the chief minister job in 2006, Jayalalitha was the loser.

In neighboring Andhra Pradesh, there was another colorful figure from the silver screen. N.T. Rama Rao also had played god figures. I suspect he still thought he was a Hindu deity. He wore saffron robes all the time, make-up, and exploited his god-like movie demeanor incessantly. The people of Andhra Pradesh ate it up. But N.T. Rama Rao was not very competent and never gained much traction politically outside his state.

Q: You left Madras in early '91?

COHEN: I received a domestic assignment to the World Trade Center in Miami, a detail to a state or local government agency. I expected to work with Latin American trade issues. We packed out our household effects (HHE) in preparation for departure to the United States. Two weeks before we were slated to leave, I received a phone call from Washington. Earlier in the bid cycle, I sought an assignment as a science attachï¿½ in Budapest, Hungary. All I received was a cold shoulder, not even a "thanks but no thanks." The assignment had been promised to someone else. Being isolated in southern India, I enjoyed little opportunity to lobby for the job.

My career development officer (CDO) asked if I was still interested in going to Budapest as science attachï¿½. Lulu and I quickly conferred. I said sure. My orders were immediately cut to include five months of Hungarian language training. This is less than the normal year of language training but was all I could get. I did not know what happened in Washington or how the assignment came through. All our HHE was packed in anticipation for a domestic assignment. We could not repack for an onward overseas posting. It was a mess.

This was February 1991. The Gulf War was approaching its final cataclysm. The embassy in New Delhi directed travelers to fly the Pacific route rather than across the Middle East and over the Atlantic. We flew from India via Malaysia to Japan and spent a few days there with my sister Barbara, an English teacher. We continued on to the United States. Our two children, Rebecca and Andrew, were still very young; Rebecca was three years old, Andrew a year and a half. We reached Washington and I make my appearance at the Department. I received a surprise.

"Mr. Cohen, we are sorry but you have a direct transfer; you are needed in Budapest right away." In addition, home leave had to be deferred. I was already registered for language study at FSI. My name was already on the roster. I informed the FSI registrar that I would not be taking Hungarian. We were in Washington for a couple weeks, which included a week of area studies and one week consultations. I arrived in Budapest April 4, 1991. The family remained behind. Lulu took the kids to Mexico to her parents. They came out a couple of months later but remained only six months. Lulu did not feel comfortable in Hungary. A couple of incidents with Hungarians probably jaded her. When she went back to Mexico at the end of the year, she decided to remain there and later in Washington. The stressed our marriage certainly. That was a downside to this assignment.

Q: You were there until when?

COHEN: I remained in Hungary until August 1994. I was environment, science and technology (EST) attachï¿½. Later, I learned how the job landed on my lap. The designated officer for the position, Bernie Oppel, had served in the Oceans, Environment, and Scientific Affairs Bureau (OES). I never met Bernie, but I got an earful about his corridor reputation! In autumn of 1990, Bernie was supposed to be taking Hungarian. For whatever reason, he possessed less than full enthusiasm for language study, or perhaps the assignment, and skipped out of classes. He pissed everybody off, especially the embassy! Finally, the embassy instructed the Department not to send him.

The incumbent in the Budapest EST position was Tom Schlenker. Tom was on his third Budapest assignment. He was talented in Hungarian, a very difficult language to learn, and knew the country intimately. However, Tom had reached his time-in-class (TIC) expiration. He was being "TIC-ed out," i.e. retired. After numerous delays, a firm deadline was set for him to depart Budapest. He had to be out of the country by a certain date that April. So the system had a problem. The EST position was very important at this particular juncture. This was just after the fall of Communism. If it had been two years earlier, no one would have cared. A vacancy for a couple of months would not have meant much. Five or ten years later, again, nobody really would have cared. But at this point in East European history, scientific and environmental issues were really high profile. The incumbent officer had to leave; the person paneled to take his place is screwing up and pissing off the system; and no one else was readily availablor so I thought.

Q: Did you ever find out why the guy was screwing up?

COHEN: I know nothing first hand. Perhaps, he was full of himself. Sometimes, a particular assignment actually has to be earned. I do not even remember whether he was Foreign Service or not.

After the collapse of Bernie's assignment, a number of people reportedly stepped forward for the Budapest job. EUR, the European Bureau, had a candidate. OES had its candidate. I heard that a civil servant with a scientific background was in the running. Apparently, the bureaus were sparring about who to send. The assignments panel was split. Meanwhile, my career development Officer (CDO) knew of my previous interest. What I did not know was that he had apparently neglected to put my name forward at the proper moment months earlier. I received the job in Miami and looked forward to it. My CDO approached the Director General of the Foreign Service, Ed Perkins, with my name. The DG approved. The two bureaus, EUR and OES, were taken by surprise. I had not been on the radar screen of either. I suspect both bureaus thought that the other had stabbed it in the back! So there may have been bad blood generated. Once I was paneled, OES suspected a dirty trick. OES Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Richard Smith chewed out my former Honduras boss and close friend Jim Lamont who worked at the time in OES. Jim may have made a pitch for me at some point. Smith assumed Jim had had something to do with the panel or the DG. It was grossly unprofessional treatment by Smith.

When I reached Washington, people pulled me aside and asked what was going on? "How did you get the position?" I was completely baffled. I had no idea how I had gotten paneled for this job. Perhaps it was just a question of being at the right place in the right time and having a CDO who, to his credit, was looking out for me. However it happened, I got the Budapest position.

Q: Eastern Europe was so exciting at that time.

COHEN: The profile had certainly changed.

Most officers and staff assigned to the embassy in early 1991 had been paneled in 1989 or earlier. Thus, when they had received their Budapest assignments, the Berlin Wall had yet to come down. When these individuals bid on Budapest, Eastern Europe was still relatively unimportant to the U.S. and an assignment backwater. Most Hungarian positions required a year of language training. In most cases, an assignment to an Eastern European post was made almost two years prior to the planned arrival date. I assume State Department high flyers, the most ambitious and perhaps most competent FSOs, had not considered Eastern Europe until late 1989. Some personnel posted in Budapest may have just sought to hide in a backwater Eastern European job. Others who served in the region were Eastern Europe careerists with little experience in politically active environments. From one day to the next, the paradigm shifted. Suddenly, these posts were vitally important. But the personnel system was woefully behind. It was like having a farm team having to play a major league game. Some officers then assigned to Eastern Europe were not the people that the system might have desired there. It took time to get the personnel system straightened out.

As I mentioned, the incumbent in my position, had to leave post promptly. The position was considered too important to leave vacant. A new bilateral science fund had just been set up. I arrived in Budapest without language training, little familiarity with Eastern Europe, and no local staff.

Q: Could you describe the situation in Hungary at the time that you arrived.

COHEN: The country was undergoing a dramatic transformation. Superficially, the political conversion was relatively quick - that is, the transformation from a communist to a democratic system. The political revolution happened quite rapidly in Hungary and with little upheaval. But Hungary's economic and social transition had barely begun. As the EST, the Environment, Science and Technology, attachï¿½, I focused on the country's social and economic transition as experienced by the scientific community. Hungary was undergoing the movement from the communistic centralized system of science to a Western model. I suspect the reason that the EST job was suddenly so popular was that smart FSOs realized that it was the right place to be in the early 1990s.

To assist Eastern European science, the USG launched joint scientific and technology funds with the Poles, the Czechoslovaks, the Hungarians, and the Yugoslavs. The Polish and Yugoslav funds had been established years earlier. I will get to the joint funds later in more detail. Many official visitors arrived each week in Budapest, CODELs and cabinet level visits. President Bush had been there earlier. Vice President Dan Quayle came in 1991. Hungarians had an extremely positive attitude about the United States. In general, Hungarians possess a very gloomy personality; they perpetually prefer to view the glass as half empty rather than half full. Even with that character trait, there was buoyancy in the Hungarian air that made life there exciting. Street signs and street maps still had their communist names. Soviet-era statures dotted the country. Budapest's buildings were still covered with communist-era grime. There was shabbiness to everything. But I sensed a dramatic transformation taking place. That is the Budapest into which I arrived.

Q: I imagine that the community you would be dealing with, essentially the scientific/intellectual community would have for some time been plugged into Western developments, intellectual thought and all that.

COHEN: Before I get to that, I should explain a bit more about my arrival and my predecessor.In this case, my predecessor was an expert on Hungary. Tom Schlenker was completing his third tour in Budapest. As I noted, he spoke Hungarian quite well. He served in the embassy in the mid-1960s and had been one of the "keepers of the cardinal." Cardinal in this case means Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty. Cardinal Mindszenty had been imprisoned by the communist regime and released during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Following the collapse of the uprising, he sought refuge at the U.S. Embassy. He lived in the embassy from November 1956 until 1971 when he was essentially ransomed by Richard Nixon. Mindszenty left the country, much against his will. The Woody Allen play "Don't Drink the Water" which concerns an American family that seeks refuge in a U.S. embassy in Eastern Europe, is loosely based on the Mindszenty story.

During Mindszenty's stay, an American officer always had to be present in the embassy, twenty-four/seven. There was great fear that if Mindszenty were left alone, even in the embassy, Hungarian and Russian agents would kidnap him. There were bona fide reasons for concern. Some veterans of that era claimed you could hear footsteps at night, made, they assumed, by the Hungarian intelligence service. How they had access to the building I never figured out. This was all before my time. Mindszenty's spirit still haunted the embassy. Tom had been one of the young officers who stayed overnight at the embassy to protect Cardinal Mindszenty. The Vatican paid a stipend of $50 a day to those who spent the night protecting the cardinal. The cardinal resided in the ambassador's office. Tom said the entire floor reeked of garlic.

Tom also developed a keen interest in Raoul Wallenberg. He became one of the foremost experts on Raoul Wallenberg.

Q: You might explain who Wallenberg was.

COHEN: Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat, born in 1912, sent to Budapest during the closing months of World War II. His mission, along with assistance from other brave diplomatic figures, was to save Budapest's Jewish community, already targeted for destruction. It is hard to give an actual figure as to the number of Jews Wallenberg saved in 1944 and 1945, but the number is in the scores of thousands. Thanks to Wallenberg's efforts and an amazing amount of luck, if it could be called that, the Pest ghetto was the only ghetto not destroyed by the Nazis or its Hungarian counterpart, the Arrow Cross. It was liberated by Soviet troops. The Nazis eradicated every other ghetto in Europe before the Russians or the Western allies reached them, except for Budapest. The Russians entered the outskirts of Budapest in late November 1944. The Buda side of the Danube was not completely rid of Germans until February. Hungarian Jews residing outside of Budapest were shipped to Auschwitz. Within Budapest, many Jews were saved with the connivance and machinations of Wallenberg who worked directly with Adolf Eichmann to prevent him from carrying out his mission of extermination. At the end of the war, Wallenberg fell into Soviet hands. The Russians arrested him and took him to Moscow. Wallenberg then disappeared. Despite years of fruitless efforts by the Western governments, Sweden and others, he remained lost behind the Iron Curtain. Decades later, the Russians officially acknowledged that Wallenberg died in prison in 1947. Many doubted even that was true.

Tom became an expert on Raoul Wallenberg. He knew within Budapest where Wallenberg's safe houses were located, where Wallenberg worked, the Nazis offices, etc. He crafted a walking tour he called the "Wallenberg Tour." He escorted visitors around the city and pointed out the various locations, safe houses. Remember, at this time, Budapest did not have history guidebooks that referred to Wallenberg. Under the communist regime, commemorative plaques were not placed on buildings citing them as World War II safe houses for Jews! So Tom conducted research on his own. I was on Tom's last Wallenberg tour, the last one he gave before he shipped out. Over the course of my assignment, I also became very familiar with Budapest's Jewish community, its recent history, the synagogue, etc. I learned quite a bit more about Wallenberg and the history of Jews during the war.

Q: When you took over, how about his contacts?

COHEN: In the two weeks we overlapped Tom took me around and introduced me to his contacts. I did benefit from my Washington consultation period. In March just before I shipped out to Budapest, there had been the initial meeting in Washington of the nascent U.S.-Hungarian Science & Technology Joint Fund. With funds appropriated by the U.S. Congress through the Department of State, the USG put up $1 million and the Hungarian Government put up $1 million in local currency. The money was used to support scientific exchanges between the two countries. Two million dollars may not sound like a lot of money. However, the payments for add-on costs such as travel and per diem, computers, chemical reagents, etc. was so invaluable for the Eastern European scientists who were as poor as church mice. For Hungarian scientists, the opportunity to conduct joint research with their U.S. counterparts, a ticket to the United States, two weeks per diem, money for reagents was manna from heaven. The Americans relished the opportunity to work with Eastern European scientists who were indeed talented.

At that meeting in Washington, I met U.S. agency S&T administrators and their Hungarian counterparts, including representatives from the academy of sciences, the ministries of environment, health, agriculture, etc. My meetings with the government officials who were engaged in this program provided me a big leg up.

Q: I would think with the scientific community the working language would have been English anyway.

COHEN: It was. With the scientists I had no problems. My difficulty was not with the scientists or the science administrators. My difficulty was speaking with the secretaries and the intermediaries between the scientists and me. To my knowledge, I was the only American substantive officer not to have received any Hungarian language training before reaching post. I was also the only FSO in that entire mission who did not have direct access to an OMS, an office management specialist. Thus, not only did I not have the ability to communicate in the local language, but I had to make all my own appointments and do my own administrative details and logistics.

I took language classes at the embassy and I made some progress. I could order a meal in a restaurant, take a cab, purchase groceries, and talk, simply, to a secretary. But I could not engage in a dialogue in Hungarian. I never got that far. The scientists generally spoke excellent English. Even when one did not speak English, colleagues helped out.

Q: Could you talk about the embassy? You said that the staffing had not necessarily come out of the top drawer because of the time delay; how did you find it?

COHEN: We had some good officers. The ambassador, Charlie Thomas, was a professional careerist. I liked him a lot. He cared about his troops. The deputy chief of mission (DCM) Richard Baltimore did not command as much respect as Ambassador Thomas. He had some very strong traits, and a few weak ones. He was not the best, but I have seen far worse DCMs.

Q: He is renowned as one of the first African American officers to be assigned to such a-

COHEN: Richard was very distinguished and refined. He played his part well. As I said, he was among the better DCMs with whom I worked. It goes back to Cohen's Second Law which states that in order to be successful, missions must have an ambassador and a deputy with different personality characteristics. When both the ambassador and DCM are micro-managers, or big picture guys, the mission suffers. There must be a balance, a complementary balance between the two. In Budapest, there was balance. It was not a perfect match but nor was it an unhappy mission.

Hungarians tend to be pessimists, often very gloomy. One might expect that the embassy would also have this kind of negative flow. That would conform to Cohen's First Law: embassies and consulates reflect the cultures in which they are located. However, after the fall of the communist regime, some of the famous Hungarian gloominess had dissipated. The embassy was fairly buoyant and active. It was a relatively happy embassy, at a time when Hungarians were relatively happy. There was plenty of optimism in the air. So while it might have been out of character, the embassy was a fairly positive place in which to work. We did not have a strong GSO or admin section. That created some headaches.

The embassy itself was located on Szabadsag ter, Freedom Square in downtown Budapest, just a couple blocks from the parliament building. It was a prominent location. The embassy itself was a fin de siï¿½cle, five story apartment building, painted a yellowish color. There was no street offset. A tall Soviet commemorative monument stood prominently in from of the embassy on Szabadsag ter. The Russians placed it there to commemorate the liberation of Budapest from the Nazis. A star capped the monument. Its placement in front of our noses was no coincidence.

At the time, the Hungarian and Russian Governments were negotiating various bilateral issues in preparation for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Hungary. One small but important detail concerned monuments. Each country agreed to allow the other to keep one monument on the territory of the other. Of course, there were innumerable Soviet monuments throughout Hungary. For their one monument the Hungarians selected a memorial to the Hungarian Army devoured on the Don River during the Battle of Stalingrad. The Russians decided to protect the monument in front of the U.S. Embassy. They assumed I guess that the Hungarians would not readily dismantle the enormous Soviet monument on the Citadel above the Gellert Hotel. The stone pedestal must have been 50 feet high topped by a statue of a woman holding the largest feather anywhere. I'll get to the issue of monuments a little later.

The embassy's interior was ancient. During communism, the embassy had not been upgraded. I suspect the USG invested little in most of our East Block missions during the Cold War. Once the Berlin Wall came down, the embassies required a face lift and major repair. In 1991 the embassy was being renovated floor by floor, top to bottom. This affected our operations as we bounced from floor to floor to keep ahead of the construction crews.

The mission had competent political section led by Tom Robertson. The Foreign Commercial Service (FCS) officer when I arrived was David Hughes who had actually been in Bombay when I was in Madras. He was a bit of a jerk and left in 1991. His successor was very popular as was the junior FCS officer also named Hughes but no relation. The USAID chief Tom Cowles arrived a few weeks after I did. All in all, the personnel coming on board were a good crew.

The embassy was situated on the Pest (east) side of the Danube River. The Embassy Marine House was located in the Castle District, the Var, across the river from the embassy in Buda, the west side of the Danube River. The United States took possession of the property after World War II. The Marines had the best view in the citin Budapest, that's saying a lot. The property was worth millions of dollars, even then. Imagine what its worth now. In the nineteenth century, the structure behind the residential part of Marine House was a Hapsburg prison. The Marines set up a gym there. Next door to the Marine House was the Hilton Hotel. I believe it was most impressive Marine facility anywhere on the planet.

Q: Let us talk about your work. Could give a thumbnail sketch of where Hungarian science stood.

COHEN: I'll speak a bit about Hungarian scientists and provide a short history lesson. With the exception of Israel, probably no culture in the world produces so many highly competent scientists within such a small population. After World War I, the Treaty of Trianon created the modern Hungarian state. Two-thirds of its pre-World War territory was lost. Hungarian universities were located throughout that part of the Austria-Hungarian Empire amputated from the home country. Those universities were turned over to Romanians and Czechs. The Hungarian professors came back to Hungary. Unfortunately, there were not enough university jobs in Hungary to absorb all these Hungarian professors. Many of these professionals found jobs at gymnasiums, at the high school level. You had college professors teaching high school mathematics. As a result, many talented Hungarians, particularly Hungarian Jews in Budapest, received a very superior education in mathematics and the sciences. Some eventually came over to the United States and became the driving force behind the Manhattan Project. Hungarians hold their scientists in high regard. Hungarians also believe their language, Hungarian, contributes to their analytical skills.

Hungarians excelled in the basic sciences and in pure research. Hungarian output got thinner as you moved into the applied sciences and scientific applications. Two generations under communism contributed to this imbalance. Since World War II, and probably before, scientific administration had been centralized within rigid bureaucratic structures. Scientific decision-making, allocating funding for research, was not made on the basis of the caliber of the science. There was no peer review structure, no competition based on scientific merits of the research. Support for research was predicated on non-scientific reasons, including political. Although top notch, Hungarian science had drifted during communism. Funding under the communist system was channeled through research institutes, not universities. All scientists were starved for research funding, some more than others. Institute administrators controlled money received from the central government. The bureaucrats held all the cards. No logical mechanism existed to weigh competing scientific research requests and allocate resources. Hungarian scientists were quite frustrated. Hungarian science stagnated.

We come to 1991. A bilateral agreement had been signed the previous year to create the U.S.-Hungarian Science & Technology Joint Fund for research. The USG agreed to provide one million dollars a year, the GOH put up the equivalent in forints, the Hungarian currency. A joint committee consisting of Hungarian ministry and U.S. agency representatives of both countries determined which projects received funding. The committee met twice a year. Funds were used by the scientists to travel to the other country. Hungarian scientists utilized funds for various add-on costs.

The secretariat of which I was co-chair, ran the show. Twice a year, the joint committee met and reviewed proposals for joint projects. Pairs or teams of scientists, American and Hungarian, prepared project proposals in the $10-50,000 range. The proposal might include $10,000 for transportation costs, $10,000 for per diem, perhaps $5,000 for computers for the Hungarian researcher, whatever. The team applied to the joint fund. The committee members from the government agencies distributed the project proposals to subject matter experts for peer review. The U.S. and Hungarian government agencies ranked the proposals and agreed on which projects to fund. After announcing the grantees, we deposited the funds into a bank account in Budapest. The Hungarian scientist or administrator controlled the account and was responsible for reporting the status of the project. I served as the joint fund administrator. I was not directing the peer review process. With the capable Dora Groo, the Joint Fund's program manager, we managed the meeting process, funding distribution, special events, the bookkeeping, etc.

The U.S.-Hungarian Science & Technology Joint Fund was popular among both Hungarian and U.S. researchers. The Hungarians had been starved for money for so long that the opportunity to travel to the West, with per diem, was a real gift.

For the American scientists, the fund provided an opportunity to establish ties with Hungarian scientists. The return on our annual one million dollar investment was exponentially out of proportion to the money expended. I might add the joint fund was not an entitlement program.

Identical joint funds were on-going in Poland and Yugoslavia. Czechoslovakia signed their program about the same time as the Hungarian one was established. We utilized the joint fund mechanism for capacity building - to wean the institutes away from Soviet style directed research. To engender legitimate, transparent peer review systems we held workshops within Hungary and among all the Eastern European joint funds. As I noted, under communism funding was not linked to the caliber of the research conducted.

Q: Were the Soviets disengaging or had they already been disengaged?

COHEN: "Soviet influence" or Soviet-mentality? I did not sense that Moscow had entirely determined the Hungarian scientific system. Moscow imposed the structure by which the Hungarian Academy of Sciences dominated. Scientists, no mater their field of research, were constrained by the rigid research model imposed on them. But it was really a Hungarian managed system, perhaps slightly more liberal than in neighboring countries. Despite the political changes following 1989, the old structures still remained in place. No revolution had yet changed the thinking at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences or within the ministries. Those ministries existed almost unchanged. Emerging from the Soviet-style system took time. Seminars, workshops, exposure to Western scientists, travel to the U.S. all played their part.

Q: You are breaking a large rice bowl when you are trying to change the system. There had to be all sorts of apparatchiks who were no good. Yet, it was not our call to weed them out. How was this working during the time you were there, '91 to '94?

COHEN: It was not our job to weed out apparatchiks, as you said. The Hungarians had to decide whether and how to do that. Initially, among the government ministries, personnel remained the same. What was changing was an attitude, the work ethic. It was becoming increasingly apparent scientists, and even bureaucrats, were going to have to earn their way. Under the communist regime, there was little incentive to work hard. The pay was not worth much, but you did not have to put forth much effort. Now, an opportunity has emerged to obtain additional funds, conduct serious research that is internationally regarded. The potential rewards were greater, but so was the required effort.

That created some problems. The joint fund offered a nice pot of money, not a large rice bowl but enough. However, to get it, the scientists had to find a collaborator, develop a relationship, prepare a research proposal, polish it, and submit it. The odds of a proposal being approved by the fund were perhaps twenty percent. About eighty percent of the applicants were not going to get their requested funding. Scientists had to develop research proposals in the applied scientific fields. Pure science was not as likely to be funded. When the ministries got together, i.e. the Department of Agriculture with its Ministry of Agriculture counterpart, what criteria would be used to select which project proposals to fund? Pure research on some esoteric topic? Or research with practical value, maybe even economic value down the road? Hungarian scientists learned they could not just sit back and conduct pure science anymore. They had to get their hands dirty.

Hungary's scientific culture rewarded theorists, perhaps because they did not have the tools to conduct applied research. This was due, in part, to a lack of infrastructure. Geniuses like many of the famous Hungarian twentieth century scientists did not need computers. Hungary enjoyed a great reputation in mathematics which does not require much more than a chalkboard and chalk.

Under the communist system, Hungarian scientists lost their way. In our society, economic value is derived from scientific research. A new medicine developed by a pharmaceutical company can be produced and marketed. In agriculture biotechnology advances can be patented and the products sold for a handsome profit. But under the communist system, where were the economic incentives? Moreover, there was a large downside and plenty of risk. The nail that sticks up gets hammered down. The Hungarian scientists had to adjust. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an old, esteemed institution, had to adjust in order to keep the funding flowing. The academy began to transform itself and decentralize up some of its influence and power.

Q: Was there a steady leakage of top scientists from Hungary to the United States, Great Britain or elsewhere?

COHEN: Among Hungarians and scientists from other former East Bloc countries, ties were well established. But even if tenuous, lines of communication between Hungary and the West had never been totally eradicated. The symbiotic relationship where scientists from different countries join together actually multiplies, logarithmically, the caliber of the science. That cross fertilization along with access to journals and literature is so vital. I refer to the time before the Internet. In some cases I noticed Hungarian scientists seemed not fully aware of what was going on in their own fields.

To answer your question, I was unaware of a major scientific brain drain during my tenure. The bilateral Joint Fund assisted Hungarian scientists within their own country. As long as opportunities existed within Hungary to conduct research, there was less urgency to emigrate.

Q: Could you discuss computerization at the time you were? This was the cusp of information revolution. The Internet was to follow shortly. Was there such a thing as a scientific library that we were sponsoring or anything of this nature?

COHEN: Computers in the early 1990s compared to today, 2008, were very primitive. Computer memory, number crunching, could not compare to contemporary technology. I noted few computers at the ministries or institutes. Maybe the head of a department had one. But when Hungarians got a computer, they sure learned how to use it.

Although I am no scientist, I learned important lessons about scientific research. A key to conducting worthwhile research is the sanctity of data. The best computer technology on the planet cannot overcome crappy data.

I will give an example. In November 1991, a young epidemiologist from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, Dr. Mary Agocs, was assigned to work with a Hungarian counterpart conducting research on asthma in pre-adolescent in children. Childhood asthma was a growing problem in the U.S. The Hungarian researcher, associated with an institute under the Ministry of Health, was conducting a long-term investigation of this topic. From another GOH institution he obtained sulfur dioxide (SO2) emission air quality data. Specifically, SO2 was suspected of being the catalyst for the illness. He linked the emissions data to detailed medical information on child asthmatics provided to him by doctors and pediatricians throughout the country. The hypothesis sought to ascertain a correlation between SO2 and the incidence of asthma in children.

It sounds pretty simple. However, in the U.S. we have great difficulty doing this. American doctors cannot be ordered by CDC to collect and submit data. On the other hand, Hungary had a centralized top down system whereby the government essentially mandated data collection by doctors. There was no compensation for the clinics. The institute collected the data from hundreds of doctors. What a treasure trove of information for the researcher!

However, as Dr. Agocs became more familiar with the system, she observed serious problems with the data. The medical clinics had been ordered to collect the childhood asthmatics data, a time consuming process. Medical staff had no vested interest in assuring the accuracy or sanctity of the data. They were not getting paid for the work involved. No incentive existed to be scientifically careful and correct. The staff just wanted to get the government mandate off their backs. Thus, many clinics just submitted unchecked data, or in some cases, information just made up. The Ministry of Health institute was kept happy.

If you multiply the lack of precision and care in data collection through hundreds of clinics, over time, you can see that the data could be severely skewed. At the end of the day, the sanctity of the asthmatic data had to be questioned. Dr. Agocs identified the problem and valiantly tried to fix it. She met personally with data providers and expressed heartfelt appreciation for their contributions. She attempted to get buy-in and provide recognition. We learned the hard way that Soviet-style data collection, done involuntarily, meant the data itself was compromised. In a country like Hungary, folks had little incentive or tradition to do this out of the goodness of their hearts. At the end of the day, a dedicated investigator had to question the accuracy of the research results.

Q: I was in Vietnam when we used statistics on villages under communist control. The results were very dubious.

COHEN: In that situation, there were clear political implications. But in the case I presented, the prevalence of childhood asthma and the impact of air quality, the resulting scientific study would be published in peer reviewed journal articles. It was, supposedly, apolitical.

The state of Hungarian research was more fragile than we had realized. In Hungary, we sought to change attitudes and behavior. We urged institutes to extract the research from the hands of the administrators and place it into the hands of the researchers. The S&T joint fund directed its money to the scientists. We sought to reduce the power of the suffocating bureaucratic structure.

We were not the only game in town. The EU countries wanted in. For example, the French science attachï¿½ was a nuclear physicist. That tells you where the French prioritized their efforts. However, at that point in time, the U.S. program, even though it was not large, was the most popular. Why? Much goodwill had been engendered following the fall of communism. The Germans, the British, were not perceived as liberators. In 1989 President George H.W. Bush gave a dramatic speech in front of parliament building. No other western leader made even a fraction of the impact President Bush had. The Hungarians looked to the United States as the model. Whereas other European countries did channel funding into science money, perhaps more in total than we did, our funding had a tremendous impact.

The State Department funding for the U.S.-Hungarian S&T Joint Fund lasted about four or five years. The funds came straight from the State Department budget. For all the Eastern European bilateral programs, it was about five million dollars. Perhaps some countries, maybe Poland, received a little more. Maybe the Slovaks got less. The Hungarian fund received one million dollars annually. Tragically, funding for the joint funds was slashed by Secretary of State Warren Christopher during one of the Department's mid-1990s budget cutting exercises. I guess the uniqueness of the program stuck out like a sore thumb in the State budget. You cannot imagine the howls of protest that we received from the scientific community, other U.S. Government agencies, and the Hungarian Government for cutting this piddling one million dollar program. You would think we were cutting a popular one hundred million dollar program! We tried to save it. In fact, USAID stepped in and kept it going for at least one additional year. This is after I departed post. Unfortunately, the money and the fund dried up. While the fund operated, the State Department got a tremendous return on its investment. In every way, it was a complete success cut short. I believe it still operates but at a lower level of funding.

I am proud to have been involved with it. The Hungarian S&T Joint Fund operated from a tiny office at the Budapest Technical University in the shadow of the famous Gellert Hotel. As I mentioned, the joint fund program manager who did the bookkeeping, managed the accounts, tracked and monitored the projects was a wonderful person, Dora Groo, hired by Tom Schlenker before he left post in April 1991. She was completely dedicated to the program. When the office got a computer or new software, she actually read that thick book that accompanies the computer to learn how the damn thing operated. She and I established procedures which eased the onerous reporting burden on scientists but gave them financial responsibility. During the three and a half years that Dora and I managed the Joint Fund together, our accounting was accurate to the penny. In fact, one time we were off by four cents. I spent hours tracking down the discrepancy. I found it. Looking back, that was probably a foolish exercise. But we were absolutely committed to the success and integrity of the program. Each year the fund held two meetings, one in Hungary and six months later in the United States.

Q: How did your work fit within the embassy? Did they stay out of your way?

COHEN: I heard through the grapevine that within the embassy my job was considered the best. Science work was only one part of my portfolio. Another large component dealt with the environment. This was the first time that we had access to former Soviet Bloc facilities, to the environmental contamination that had been done. It was an eye opening experience. We promoted commercial opportunities for U.S. companies seeking pollution remediation contracts.

When speaking about the environment, I must describe the Gabcikovo Dam controversy. A treaty signed in 1977 by communist Hungary and Czechoslovakia governed the hydroelectric project.

The two stage dam system was designed by Soviet-trained engineers. The upstream dam at Gabcikovo would collect and release water into the Dunakiliti channel for about 720 MW (megawatts) power generation. About 100 kilometers downstream, the flow would fill the reservoir behind the downstream dam at Nagymaros. The second dam would control water level fluctuations and generate another 150 MW of power generation. The system would work like a toilet; the flushing Danube at each dam would generate electricity. Unfortunately, in between was the Szigetkoz, a sensitive wetlands area, which would probably be devastated by this process. The wetlands served as the hydrological recharge for a large swath of northeastern Hungary. Moreover, the Nagymaros Dam would bisect and scar a beautiful gorge near the historic Hungarian town of Visegrad. Other negative environmental impacts from the project included probable deterioration of Danube water quality.

A nascent Hungarian NGO called the Danubian Circle was formed in 1984 to oppose the project. From humble beginnings, the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros controversy eventually catalyzed by the late 1980s anti-government protests in Hungary and led indirectly to the fall of the communist regime. The popular anti-Nagymaros movement was a new convulsion for Hungary, for Eastern Europe for that matter. The environmental movement was grassroots and emotional. After staging the largest protest in Hungary since the 1956 Revolution, the NGOs succeeded in forcing the Hungarian Government to suspend its half of the project at Nagymaros. Soon after, the government announced that Nagymaros would not be completed. It was a fairytale success story for the environmentalists and led to a softened approach by the regime to popular dissent.

By then after years of construction, the Czechoslovak portion was close to completion. Many Hungarians considered the completion of Gabcikovo to be a potential environmental disaster. Just below the dam on the Hungarian side of the Danube, the Szigetkoz already suffered from reduced water flow from the river. Hungarian environmentalists feared the dam would destroy the Szigetkoz.

This movement then led to the collapse of the Iron Curtain. There had always been close ties between Hungary and Germany; for years each summer Germans from both East and West portions vacationed in Hungary. It was an opportunity for families to reunite, if only briefly, on Lake Balaton. East Germans witnessed what was going on in Hungary. In the summer of 1989, the excitement generated in Hungary by the environmental movement proved too much to keep pent up. The Hungarian Government announced that it would not keep the border with Austria sealed. Many East Germans exploited Hungarian largesse to flee the East Bloc. Once a hole opened up n the Iron Curtain, it was impossible to plug. Eventually, the end-around through Hungary led to the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the East Bloc.

Hungary's heroic 1980s environmental NGOs and the anti-Nagymaros movement had direct lineage to the fall of communism throughout Eastern Europe. However, to the chagrin of the Hungarians, the Czechoslovaks - and eventually just the Slovaks - did not have the same popular environmental spirit or commitment in their country. After Slovakia and Czech Republic split apart on January 1, 1993 in the "Velvet Divorce," the Slovaks recommitted to completing their end of the dam project. That this could cause more damage to the wetlands and create other environmental problems for Hungary was viewed as irrelevant since a treaty had been signed. Gabcikovo, situated just above the frontier between the two countries, had minimal environmental impact on Slovakia. Moreover, given all the sunk costs and completed construction, the perceived damage to Slovak territory had already been done.

Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel described Gabcikovo as an example of "Stalinistic megalomania." The project caused continued friction between Slovakia and Hungary. There was a common perception that once the sunk costs were calculated, the project must be completed, no matter what. The Slovaks, I suspect, wanted to be paid off. That was not going to happen. To resolve the conflict, the two countries went to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). An ICJ decision in 1997 favored Slovakia.

The real villain in this set piece drama was Austria which financed Gabcikovo. Desirous of the power to be generated, the Austrian Government apparently cared little for environmental damage done to its downstream neighbors. The dam could never have been constructed in Austria. The Austrian public would never have permitted it. I believe the Austrians behaved in similar fashion with regards to the Slovak nuclear facilities at Bohunice.

Q: What happened?

COHEN: Construction continued on the Gabcikovo Dam and the Dunakiliti channel. I do not know the ultimate environmental impacts.

An important environmental event at the time was the creation the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe (REC). When the REC was inaugurated on September 6, 1990, the paint and plaster were still wet at its new Szentendre (just north of Budapest) location. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) Administrator William K. Reilly attended the ribbon-cutting. The impetus for creation of the REC came from the USG which contributed five million dollars from Support for Eastern European Democracy (SEED) Act funds over three years, as well as the EU. All the countries of Eastern and Central Europe were members, as were many Western European countries. When I arrived in Budapest, the REC was still an immature organization. The staff was still being formed. A Hungarian environmentalist associated with the Danubian Circle, Peter Hardy, was the director; his deputy from the EPA, Steve Wassersug, and his wife Faith, lived at the Cinege Panzio in the Buda hills. For two months I had a room there as well until I went into permanent quarters. We became close friends. Steve was a USG official on detail to the REC. Despite entreaties from EPA and me for a formal NSDD-38 created position, the Embassy did not provide support to Steve. He enjoyed no embassy diplomatic privileges and was not treated by the embassy as a part of the community. Since Steve required almost no formal support except APO and commissary privileges, access to the med unit, etc., agreement by the front office to formalize his position would have cost the embassy almost nothing. EPA would have transferred the required funding to the State Department. I blame the DCM, Richard Baltimore, for this obstreperous attitude.

The REC was created as a non-profit, independent organization that assisted with tackling the region's environmental problems through information sharing, public participation, and cooperation among the region's stakeholders, including governments, businesses, and NGOs. Funds from governments and other donors were channeled through the REC for worthy environmental projects, workshops, and studies. The REC served as a clearinghouse for environmental information: scientific, technical, policy, legal, and best practices. As a catalyst for promoting environmental awareness throughout the region, the REC was the first institution of its kind. From the day the REC opened its doors, many visitors, including CODELS, formed a conga line to check it out. Despite some hiccups a few years later when SEED Act money dried up, the REC is still going strong today.

The REC was an essential institution. After years of Soviet occupation, Hungary and other countries in the region suffered from significant environmental degradation and minimal environmental awareness. The last Soviet soldiers departed Hungary on June 30, 1991. Only then did Hungarians gain access to the former Soviet bases throughout the country. Some were severely environmentally damaged. If these bases had been in the U.S., they would be considered "Super Fund" sites.

In some cases the departing Soviet military took last minute glee to reeking additional havoc on the bases. During the withdrawal negotiations, the Soviet and Hungarians negotiators could not agree on financial compensation. The Soviets demanded compensation for the "infrastructure" left behind on the bases. The Hungarians thought this ridiculous and countered by asking for reparations to remediate the environmentally damaged sites. Nor could the two sides agree on the fuel still stored on the bases. The Russians wanted payment for the fuel. The Hungarians balked. On some Soviet bases, the commanders then maliciously ordered the taps to the storage tanks opened. Rather than hand the fuel to the Hungarians, the military permitted thousands of gallons of gasoline and fuel oil run into the soil. Even as they left, the Russians continued creating even worse environmental hazards.

When the Hungarians finally gained access to these bases, the environmental challenges were immense. At one Soviet fuel depot site I visited, Pï¿½tfï¿½rd?, the soil was so contaminated that when a flask was dropped down a short two meter borehole, it brought up pure aviation gasoline. The fuel from the ground was clean and pure enough to use in aircraft! Any lit cigarette - and Hungarians liked their lit cigarettes - and we might have been history. The subsoil contamination threatened the aquifer. Wells in nearby communities already were unusable. U.S. companies, such as CH2M Hill and Chemonics sought contracts to remediate these sites.

In the early 1990s, about a dozen Peace Corps volunteers at any one time were dedicated to supporting environmental activities, especially teaching and NGO development. Since environmental issues were a dominant portion of my role in country, I wanted desperately to assist. However, the Peace Corps country director apparently viewed me as an unwanted threat to the volunteer program and sought to keep me distanced from the volunteers. When I finally met the environmental volunteers, we bonded immediately. I provided valuable policy guidance and information about current environmental issues such as the Gabcikovo controversy. The volunteers and I often met in their communities. It provided me insight as to the emerging NGO movement as well as the significant environmental issues on the minds of the public.

As I mentioned, I reached Budapest in April 1991. After two weeks overlap with my predecessor, I was put in charge of my first Budapest CODEL (congressional delegation.) It was a five member delegation led by Congressman Henry Nowak from New York. Nowak was chairman of the House Public Works and Transportation Committee. The CODEL came to Hungary to examine various projects supported with USG funding.

I will relate a humorous incident associated with that congressional delegation. When a CODEL arrives in country, it usually receives an ambassadorial briefing. Budapest briefings were held in the secured fourth floor conference room. The embassy had one small elevator. Like the embassy building, the elevator was ancient and crotchety. It was glass enclosed, but not the modern kind found in a Hyatt Hotel atrium. We arrived at the embassy and headed for the elevator. All five congressmen in the CODEL, plus the staffer and I, squeezed into the elevator. I pushed the button for the top floor. The elevator door closes. The elevator ascended one and a half flights and then stopped between floors. A couple of the congressmen, Nowak and Ben Jones from Georgia, were big men. The staffer, a short fellow, became very hyper which no one appreciated. I saw my career flash in front of my eyes. Ambassador Thomas and the country team were waiting upstairs. It took about 10 minutes for the embassy maintenance people get the elevator moving again. I heard later that the elevator frequently had problems.

Before we were rescued, Congressmen Jones, the former television actor of Dukes of Hazard fame, warned that "the first one who farts gets it." That broke the tension. Boy did I learn how new I still was to the embassy. Next to the elevator was a stairway. I had not been there long enough to learn the lock combination to get up the stairs.

My first year, I was extremely busy. Numerous delegations passed through. I assisted with the visit of Vice President Dan Quayle. He came to Budapest within a few months of my arrival. I was tasked with supporting the schedule for Mrs. Quayle and her children.

On top of my role as the environment and science attachï¿½, I still held a special interest in caves and geology. Budapest's karst geology and thermal waters are exceptionally interesting. The city claims it has more Turkish baths than Istanbul. The Buda side was sprinkled with outstanding caves. I had already met some Hungarian cavers. Some senior ministry officials at the Ministry of Environment were avid cavers. All caves in Hungary were protected by law. Just a few months before my arrival, Budapest hosted the International Congress of Speleology. The ICS, held once every four years, is the foremost international event dedicated to the study of caves and cave features.

When I mentioned that I was a caver, the ministry folks brought out the wine glasses. We drank toasts right there in the deputy minister's office. We became close friends. I was provided carte blanche to visit caves anywhere in Hungary. The ministry arranged guides. I took advantage of the offer and frequently visited Hungarian caves. In Buda, caves were located right in the neighborhoods. Coming out of one cave, my Hungarian colleagues hopped on a bus afterwards and went home. After all, as the environment attachï¿½, inspecting Hungarian geologic features such as caves was part of my official duties!

With the vice president's visit, a question emerged: what to do with Mrs. Quayle? She wanted an educational agenda for her two pre-teen children. I suggested a visit to a commercialized cave, Szeml?hegyi Barlang, in Buda. (Barlang is the Hungarian word for cave.) Szeml?hegyi Barlang was unique. Unlike caves with which we are usually familiar, it had been formed primarily by rising thermal water instead of percolating ground water. The trail through the cave was an easy walk. Mrs. Quayle and her children visited Szeml?hegyi. The cave was quite a hit, literally. Since in places the roof of the cave was not very tall, visitors had to duck. Mrs. Quayle's Secret Service protective detail, tall guys all, should have been wearing helmets. Instead, they crashed through the cave, occasionally banging their heads on the ceiling of the cave. They must have pretty strong skulls. We also arranged for Mrs. Quayle and the children to visit an English-environmental studies class taught by a Peace Corps volunteer at one of the local high schools. Since I was so busy with his wife's schedule, I never did see the Vice President.

A few months later, I escorted Senator Bob Graham (D- FL) to the nuclear facility at Paks in central Hungary. Paksi Atomer?m? produced about half of Hungary's electricity. Its four VVER (Soviet-designed pressurized water reactor) units are Hungary's sole nuclear generation facility, and it is a good one. Of all the Soviet-designed East Bloc nuclear reactors, Paks was probably the best. The stainless steel reactor shields really shined. The place was spotless. Four years later I visit Chernobyl. There was no comparison. Paks was so well maintained it could have been located in the U.S. Chernobyl was a dirty dinosaur.

Following his return to the U.S., the senator kindly mentioned my name at a congressional hearing. He also called my grandparents who were Florida constituents. That got them talking at the clubhouse!

Another "nuclear" visitor was Dr. Edward Teller. I was not involved with his trip. When Teller came to Budapest, he was in his mid to late 80s. Teller carried this big stick. I cannot call it a cane; it was like a shillelagh, thick and almost as tall as he was. Dr. Teller was Hungarian-born and spoke perfect Hungarian, if, according to the Hungarians, a bit old fashioned. The Hungarians worshipped the ground Teller stood on. He was a national hero regardless of his "Dr. Strangelove" H-bomb history. He was the last of that very famous line of Hungarian scientists who emigrated to the U.S. and later developed the atomic bomb.

Teller came to promote nuclear energy. He met with officials at the Ministry of Industry and Trade building on Margit korut (boulevard) on the Buda side of the Danube. Teller must have been representing the French nuclear industry. At the time, a debate was raging in Hungary whether to augment Paks' nuclear capacity with an additional two reactor units. A Soviet VVER design was not being seriously considered. Teller pressed the Hungarians to consider French nuclear technology. The minister and his staff just ate out of Teller's hand.

It had been an overcast day. Teller had come with his raincoat. When he rose to depart, the Hungarians helped him into a gray raincoat and escorted him to the elevator. He went down twelve floors to his waiting car. Then, I noticed that my own raincoat was missing. I ran to the elevator, descended to the ground floor, and emerged through the front door of the ministry. Teller was just getting into the back seat his car. I called to him. He looked at me like I was a cockroach. I excused myself. "Dr. Teller, I believe you have my coat." He stared at me. I reached into the pocket of the coat and pulled out my gloves. "Wait right here and I will get your coat." I went back up the elevator to the twelfth floor and grabbed the gray raincoat that was hanging alone on the rack. I raced down and we made the coat exchange.

I related that story to other people. Some asked me why I returned the coat. "You could have had Dr. Edward Teller's raincoat!" This was before e-bay, of course. I had never considered it. See, my raincoat was almost brand new; his was ratty and threadbare...

Q: Did George Soros come through?

COHEN: Sure. He came through but I do not remember meeting him. However, Soros did influence me indirectly. In 1991 George Soros financed and endowed the Central European University, based in Budapest. The university had an environmental program, the first of its kind, to my knowledge, anywhere in the former East Bloc. As EST attachï¿½, I was close to the American director of this program. He invited Dr. Agocs from the CDC and me to accompany the university environmental program on a July 1992 bus trip to southern Poland. We visited environmental sites throughout southern Poland and Slovakia.

The environmental program we escorted consisted of about 27 students from all over the former East Block - the Baltics, the former Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and even Albania. All the former East Bloc was represented. Most participants were in their mid-to-late 20s. Other than the director, Mary and I were the sole Americans. We traveled by bus from Budapest through Slovakia, across the Tatra mountains to Poland. Bizarrely, of all these nationalities represented on that bus, the Czechoslovak authorities - it was still Czechoslovakia at the time - only took the passports of two nationalities for secondary examination: the Albanians and the American diplomats! Something about that black passport made the immigration officials curious.

We stayed in Krakow at a university dormitory. We visited environmental sites around the city and beyond, steel mills and coal mines. But we did more. We hiked in the Carpathian Mountains and drank beer on a raft trip through a beautiful gorge. As part of the program, the group visited Wawel Castle, Kazimierz, and the former Krakow ghetto near the Vistula River. The group also traveled to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Although obviously not an environmental issue, the director believed it important for the participants to visit the former concentration camp. Under communism students did not make class trips to former concentration camps. We did. Some from the group actually complained before we went. "Why should we go there?" "Back in Russia, we have enough of this." The visit dramatically affected many. I heard no groans about the visit afterwards. For Mary and me, it was certainly an experience. A year later we returned to Poland and went to the site of the former concentration camp at Maidanek, outside Lublin.

Imagine the sociological dilemma of young men and women from all over the former Soviet East Bloc. For many, this was the opportunity to examine for the first time this relatively recent history. Until this moment, most seemed unaware of non-Sovietized World War II history, of the Holocaust. It had not been a part of their education. A Russian woman who had complained vociferously before we reached Auschwitz choked up. But I noticed an exception to this collective ignorance. The half dozen Hungarians in the group did not seem surprised. Hungary apparently had provided some minimal education about the Holocaust. There was a Hungarian display within the Auschwitz museum. In 1992, the East Bloc displays downplayed the principal victims, the Jews, and remained overwhelmingly geared towards the "Great Patriotic War."

Although Hungarian Jewry had been wiped almost clean by Adolph Eichmann, a sizable remnant of Budapest Jews survived the war, thanks to Wallenberg and others. A Hungarian woman described her own personal saga. During her youth in communist Hungary, her parents kept secret her Jewish heritage. She did not learn about her background until she applied for a spot at the university. Then, it mattered since a severe anti-Jewish quota system was in place. Only at that point did she discover her Jewish parentage. This woman was fascinated by the Auschwitz trip, as were the others. As I said, the Hungarians seemed more aware about the Holocaust.

Not only is George Soros Jewish, he survived the Budapest ghetto. Other well known people, including Congressman Tom Lantos (D-Ca.) whom I did meet, were survivors. I assume that was why Soros had a particular interest in Central Europe, particularly Budapest.

Q: But he really is a very influential figure in Eastern Europe.

COHEN: He certainly is. There were other figures, too; the Lauder family.

Q: This is the perfume-?

COHEN: Yes. I believe the family was from Vienna originally. The Ronald S. Lauder foundation in collaboration with the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) created Jewish summer camps throughout the region. For one ceremony I visited the camp in Szarvas, Hungary, as representative of the ambassador.

I enjoyed a variety of experiences in Jewish Hungary. Budapest had a fairly buoyant, even thriving Jewish community. I was familiar with the synagogues. I met with some of the rabbis. I went to services during the holidays.

The cathedral-like Dohï¿½ny Synagogue is Budapest's largest. Following its restoration in the early 1990s, it is a beautiful structure. The arched interior contained two balconies. The ornate exterior had this fascinating brick pattern. Two Moorish domes flanked the main synagogue entrance. Most restoration funding came from the United States. Tony Curtis, another Hungarian survivor of the ghetto, was a key fund-raiser. The other city synagogues were also active.

Using a Hungarian guidebook to Jewish monuments and synagogues, I visited synagogues and cemeteries throughout the countrand throughout the region for that matter. Most Hungarian synagogues were abandoned or destroyed during the war. Some survived but were no longer used as synagogues since the communities no longer existed. Many former synagogues stood empty in the middle of a town or on its outskirts. Most Jewish cemeteries, usually beyond town limits, had seen little or no upkeep. Some were completely overgrown with trees and bushes and were hard to find. But once located they were easily identifiable as Jewish. In a few cases the cemeteries were well maintained. Someone had taken responsibility to maintain them. But I met pitifully few Jews outside of Budapest, and no communities.

The synagogue in the city of Szeged was a real gem. Szeged is located in southern Hungary near the Yugoslav frontier. I consider Szeged's the most beautiful large synagogue I have ever visitewith one exception, the small, ancient synagogue in Cochin, India. The Szeged synagogue was a memorable structure. Built around 1900, it possessed colorful stained glass and a white and blue interior. Instead of Moorish architecture, the exterior looked almost Gothic. If crosses had been placed on the various cupolas and central dome, it could be mistaken for a cathedral. I traveled to Szeged with Dr. Agocs. We met the synagogue caretaker, Mr. Marton Klein, around 80 years old, who welcomed us warmly. With Mary's Hungarian, we communicated easily. Klein gave a moving history lesson. A Holocaust survivor, Klein had been taken to Russia in a labor battalion. Many Hungarian Jews were forced to serve in labor battalions, hardly any came back. Out of his battalion of around 300 men, Klein said he was the only one to return to Hungary. He was, more or less, the Jewish community of Szeged.

Klein took care of this beautiful synagogue. Acoustically, the structure was marvelous, like an opera house. Klein possessed a wonderful baritone voice. He demonstrated the synagogue's acoustics by singing some lines from the haunting Kol Nidre prayer which opens the Yom Kippur service, the holiest day of the Jewish year. His reverberations had perfect timbre. It stunned me. Imagine listening to Klein in this empty synagogue. Klein told us the Nazis "should have taken the synagogue and left the community," rather than taking the people and leaving the synagogue. It was a very emotional visit.

A few synagogues were being reconstructed. In the city of Gyor in northwestern Hungary, the city fathers wanted to turn the shell of the synagogue into a theatre and community hall. At one time, the structure had been a beautiful synagogue. We I visited, it was completely gutted down to the dirt floor. The local municipality sought funding to refurbish it, to bring it back to its past glory. But there was no intention that it again serve as a synagogue. I was given a proposal for the reconstruction, including blueprints. That kind of thinking was not uncommon.

The 18th century Baroque synagogue in the village of Mï¿½d was my favorite. Mï¿½d is situated in Hungary's wine-producing Tokai region, in the northeastern part of the country. When Mary and I visited, the synagogue was an empty shell, except for the bimah and the bright blue Hebrew lettering on the walls. The floor was dirt. I had climbed into the building through a window. A shiver went through me when I thought about how the community had been eradicated in the spring of 1944, leaving the abandoned synagogue. Today, the synagogue has been fully restored to its former decorative glory.

On weekends I visited synagogues and Jewish cemeteries throughout Eastern Europe. In the remote corner where Slovakia, Hungary and Ukraine come together, I searched for any sign of the hamlets from where my great-grandparents emigrated in the 1880s. Unfortunately, under the communists all the village names were changed. Thus, it was difficult to locate places. I obtained copies of old Hapsburg-era maps and tried to line up the old locations with the new names. Locals directed me to one ignored cemetery located in a copse of overgrown brush and trees in the middle of a huge wheat field. A pheasant blind, an old campfire site, and a couple of empty vodka bottles were all that was there amidst the old headstones. I was convinced this cemetery would have been familiar to my ancestors. The headstones were in Hebrew. However, I did not find any gravestones with recognizable names.

I conducted archival genealogical work in Bratislava and Budapest and visited synagogues in Romania and Poland. Just across the border in the northern Yugoslav town of Subotica, Szabadka in Hungarian, Mary and I visited a synagogue that was not dissimilar in size or shape to the Szeged structure. Although it was almost completely gutted, Subotica's microscopic Jewish community used a small lower room. When we showed up, they put me to work since few of them apparently read Hebrew.

Q: Did you sense anti-Semitism in Hungary at the time you were there?

COHEN: It is hard to say. Being a U.S. diplomat kept me at a distance from explicit anti-Semitism. I observed blatant anti-Semitism from a non-Hungarian direction. I will relate one small incident. The U.S.-Hungarian S&T Joint Fund administrators occasionally met with our sister joint funds from Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic. At a joint event in Debrecen, we were at a dinner. The lead Polish administrator made a remark that was outlandishly anti-Semitic. What was striking was that the comment came from a person who was highly educated and sophisticated. I was shocked. One of the persons at our table reacted swiftly. He just took him to task. Overt anti-Semitism was less prevalent in Hungary than in the neighboring countries, particularly Poland which in the early 1990s had just a few thousand Jews in the entire country. But underneath the surface, I am sure anti-Semitism pervaded more widely.

Q: As we talk, I spent five years in Yugoslavia and cannot recall anything that called attention to the plight of the Jews and the concentration camps. It was all pretty much focused on what the Croatian regime had done to the Serbs.

COHEN: Yet, the Jewish community of Yugoslavia was devastated by the Holocaust. In Budapest, Jews were not uncommon. A contact in one of the ministries related his story. At the time I knew him he was about 52 years old. When he was a toddler, he and his family were placed on a train bound to Auschwitz. Toward the end of the war, an effort to rescue some of the last Jews was being conducted surreptitiously between Himmler and American Jewish leadership. Ransom is a better term. On its way to Auschwitz the train was diverted first to Austria, then Switzerland. The Jews on that train survived. This was only one train out of thousands. My ministry contact came that close to being exterminated.

One warm weekend afternoon, Mary and I visited a cemetery in Budapest, one of the major cemeteries in the city. There was a Jewish section. We came across a very elderly couple walking arm in arm. Each had concentration camp tattoos on their arms, Holocaust survivors. Meeting survivors was not unusual. In the early 1990s quite a few still lived in Hungary.

With the lid of communism removed, an undercurrent of xenophobia, which included anti-Semitism, permeated the political scene. Hungary suffered from a right wing political backlash that was as much anti-Gypsy as anything else. As you know from your time in Yugoslavia, Balkan interethnic hatred is bottomless. There is no rational cause whatsoever; it is just there and there is no way to surmount it. Occasionally, words would come out of their mouths that reflected hatred that had been learned in their youth.

During World War II, Hungary had its own fascist group called the Arrow Cross. They were the Nazis of Hungary and were extremely vicious. German troops occupied the country in March 1944 and began rounding up Jews from the countryside. By summer most had already been shipped to Auschwitz. In October 1944 Hungary's leader Admiral Horthy lost his battle of wits with the Arrow Cross and was deposed. In its brief chaotic reign, the group utilized vicious anti-Semitism to conduct the final Jewish round-ups around Budapest. This was near the end of the war, Hungary was near collapse. Soviet forces were approaching Budapest. Yet, the Arrow Cross continued to slaughter tens of thousands of Jews and non-Jews and facilitated the transport to the death camps of thousands of others. Arrow Cross members bound three Jews together, shot the middle one in the head, and tossed the trio into the Danube. It was a gruesome picture.

Survivor stories abounded in Budapest. There was the story of a Jewish fencer who was kept on because of his fencing skills. One contact told me about his father, a Jewish officer in the Hungarian army. When the Germans entered Budapest in1944, he survived by keeping close to the Germans. He spent his days in the thermal baths at the Gellert Hotel, hobnobbing with the German officers. Because his demeanor was so distinguished, the Germans never suspected he was Jewish. He survived the war.

People survived by hiding. Many were saved by Wallenberg, Swiss Consul Carl Lutz, and others. But elsewhere in Hungary, in the provinces, in Greater Hungary across the border in Ukraine and Transylvania, Romania, Jews who survived were few and far between.

Q: There was no place to hide.

COHEN: It was very difficult to hide. In addition, the population had little awareness of what was happening. Neither the Jews nor the Hungarian citizenry knew about the death camps. The sweep through Hungary occurred so quickly. The Hungarian gendarmerie collaborated with the SS and the Gestapo. They did a pretty thorough job.

Q: What was your impression of the feelings toward the Soviets?

COHEN: As I mentioned, the last Soviet soldier departed Hungarian soil on June 30, 1991. The Hungarians declared a national holiday. What does that tell you about Hungarian feelings? The Hungarians despised the Russians. I suspect many Russian soldiers were unenthusiastic about their pending return to the USSR. Russian soldiers sold everything they owned: their watches, their helmets, clothing, even hats - you could pick up these items up for a song. When the Soviet soldiers departed, they took everything not nailed down, and most everything that was! They pulled wire out of the walls; they took the ceramic toilets; they took light fixtures. When the Hungarians gained access to these bases, nothing but the shells of buildings were left.

There was, as I mentioned earlier, a deep antipathy between the Hungarians and the Soviets. The Hungarians just wanted to be rid of the Russians. "Just leave and do not let the door hit you in the face when you walk out." The Russians felt that they deserved some respect. They constructed the buildings, bombproof airplane hangers, runways and everything else. "It's worth compensation." When arguing for financial compensation, the Russians neglected to focus on the environmental degradation that they committed. Unexpended ordinance littered free fire zones. Much had been buried. The fuel carelessly dumped onto the soil was just one example of the degradation. But I will say one thing about the Russians. They left colorful artwork commemorating pilots, cosmonauts, soldiers, etc., on the walls of the buildings. I would be sorry to see the paintings destroyed.

When the Russians pulled out, then Hungary really broke free from the East Bloc. I will provide two linguistic anecdotes.

I often asked Hungarian about their language skills. "What languages do you speak?" Many claimed some German, almost as many said they understood some English. I asked, "Did you not study Russian?" All answered in the affirmative, for twelve years from grade school on up. "Well, if you studied Russian so long, then you must have learned it." I almost always received the same answer. "I may have studied it but I never learned it!" I suspect most Hungarians knew more Russian than they wanted to admit. Russian was forced down their throats.

A popular theme in Hungarian literature and movies concerned this issue. At the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Russian language teachers permeated Hungary. Russian language instruction was a profession like any other and seemed to offer good job security. Russian was a required course from primary school all the way through gymnasium, through secondary school. Thousands of Hungarians were Russian language teachers. Then the communist East Bloc collapsed. Guess what? No one wanted to study Russian anymore. According to the plot of the story, the unemployable Russian teachers decided they would become English teachers! Too bad, few knew much English. They would be learning English themselves. The joke was that the new English teachers would be one or two lessons ahead of their students. There was more than an ounce of truth in that tale.

Q: To me, in a small European country you have got to be smart to survive.

COHEN: The Hungarians are nothing if not smart. They are sharp, highly educated and very motivated. If they want to learn a language, they would learn it.

Q: Sort of on the same subject, here is a country that had been under Soviet rule for more than four decades. What was your impression of the depth of Marxism in the country?

COHEN: Let me tell you another story.

Q: You have been in Eastern Europe too long.

COHEN: I served only one tour there.

Q: Yes, but once you get into Eastern Europe, you always have a story.

COHEN: I have many. When I arrived in Budapest, as I mentioned, the city streets still retained the names given during the communist regime. The primary Budapest boulevards included Lenin korut, People's Democratic Republic Boulevard, all this stuff. Hungarians immediately started to refer to the pre-communist street names, back to the Hapsburg names. Lenin korut became Terez korut, People's Democratic Republic simply became Republic boulevard. That is all well and good if you are a native Budapesti. But I utilized a street map printed before the change. It was a challenge to navigate the streets.

Perhaps more dramatic was the public attitude about monuments. When I arrived in Budapest, the city was pimpled with Soviet, Marxist monuments. There were monuments to the great heroic people's struggle against whatever; monuments to the liberation of the city; monuments to famous Hungarian communists; monuments to this Marxist philosopher or that writer; monuments to Marx. I suspect there were monuments to monuments! The Hungarians decided swiftly that the communist-era monuments had to be removed. In 1991 an effort was launched to relocate the communist era monuments, except for the one that I mentioned in front of the American embassy. What do you do with all these monuments? Again, this is before e-bay.

Q: Well there is a huge one up on the-

COHEN: The enormous Soviet memorial on the citadel commemorating the city's liberation is impossible to move and risky to destroy. Statues and statuary are another matter. All were relocated. Hungarians are pragmatic people. Perhaps one day, the joke went, the communists might return. Thus, it is not a good idea to destroy these statues. If the communists come back, their statues will already be available! The Hungarian people would not have to expend money to create new ones. That was the joke.

The relocated Marxist statuary was placed in a field on the edge of the XXII Kerï¿½let (district), at the far south-western end of the city. A wall was built around the monuments and the area turned into a nice park with walkways and benches. I do not remember whether a fee was charged to enter. I called it "Jurassic Park;" at the time Jurassic Park had just come out in the movies. It was a statuary garden from the communist period, hopefully, just as extinct as the dinosaurs.

While we are on the topic of statuary, I will relate a couple of additional statuary stories. As I mentioned, outside the U.S. embassy at Szabadsag ter is a monument put up by the Russians to commemorate their liberation of Budapest in 1945. Nearby is a statue to an obscure American general, Harry Hill Bandholtz. At the end of World War I, General Bandholtz was on the Inter-Allied Control Commission which supervised the disengagement of Romanian troops from a prostrate Hungary. When Romanian soldiers sought to loot the national museum, General Bandholtz stood on the museum steps and used bluster to prevent the sack of the museum. The statue was erected in 1936. In the late 1940s it was removed for "repair." The "general" was rediscovered in a warehouse in the 1980s. The statue placed in its original position on Szabadsag ter just before President Bush visited the city in July 1989. There Bandholtz stands in his World War uniform.

Immediately after World War II, a memorial was erected to Raoul Wallenberg next to the parliament building. This was during that interim period before the communists took full control over Hungary. Thinking back, it was quite amazing that a monument to Raoul Wallenberg could have been placed in Budapest right after the war. The Russians were still there in full force. But the government had not yet reverted to its future Stalinist version.

The life-size monument shows a man with a raised club in his right hand and his left hand clutching a hissing snake by the neck. The Soviets certainly did not appreciate this monument. One night, probably 1948 when tensions were high, the statue was removed by the Hungarian KGB. It eventually was placed in front of a pharmaceutical factory in Debrecen, in eastern Hungary. Given the Hippocratic Oath, it made sense that slaying a snake might refer to pharmaceuticals. On a 1992 visit to Debrecen I saw the monument. A recent memorial stone to Wallenberg had been placed next to the monument. A few fresh wreaths sat in front. For 40 years, I am sure few people had any clue what was the monument's original meaning.

Ambassador Charlie Thomas knew its story. He pressed Hungarian authorities to return it to Budapest and place it in its original location. The pharmaceutical factory did not like that idea. They probably had gotten used to it. The GOH resisted moving the monument. Another memorial to Wallenberg had subsequently been dedicated on the Buda side. Only one monument in the city could commemorate or memorialize any individual.

In my experience, few countries were as convulsed about statues and symbols as Hungary. These stories provide insight into the psyche of the Hungarians, what they thought about communism and the Soviets. Elsewhere in the former East Bloc, Albania, Romania or Bulgaria, communist-era statues were pulled down and destroyed. The Hungarians did not do it that way. They had a completely different, perhaps more pragmatic strategy. Whoever procured the statuary was probably out to make a buck.

The depth of popular hatred towards the Russians was unfathomable. In the early 1990s, the long pent-up emotions from '56 were able to come out. In October 1956 it looked briefly that the Hungarian revolution might succeed. Then on November 4 the Russian tanks crushed the revolt. Thousands of Hungarians died. Some buildings in Budapest still have bullet holes which are not from World War II.

In the early 1990s Hungary underwent a catharsis. Many issues which until then were kept hidden or suppressed now were being debated. Cardinal Mindszenty's body was returned to Hungary and reburied with great pomp. Imre Nagy's grave was rehabilitated. Nagy had led the Hungarian Government during the Revolution in 1956.

Q: Did you observe any manifestation of the binge against the Soviet security forces, the Hungarian apparatus?

COHEN: Absolutely not. The Hungarians seemed eager just to rid themselves of the Russians, ready to provide, if needed a one way train ticket to Moscow.

Concerning the Hungarian communist apparatus, I do not recollect recriminations that approach what happened in East Germany, Romania, and elsewhere. The press was certainly having a field day going over historical events. Accusations flew back and forth. But Hungarian communism during the 1970s and 1980 was nothing like the harsh Stalinist period which preceded the 1956 revolution. Prior to '56, Hungary under Matyas Rï¿½kosi had been one of the most authoritarian regimes of the East Bloc. From '56 onward under Premier Janos Kï¿½dï¿½r; Hungary actually enjoyed a modicum of economic semi-independence from the Soviet Union. Its economic system was commonly called "goulash communism." Goulash communism's message to the Hungarian people was simple: you let us rule and not cause us anymore political problems and we will endeavor to provide you with the highest standard of living possible under communism. No more revolts, no more revolutions, cease and desist and the party leadership will endeavor to assure that Hungarians benefit from the best economic standards possible. Compared to other countries in the East Bloc, Hungary did achieve that. Hungarians probably enjoyed the highest standard of living and softest.

Kadar created a different kind of communism, one that allowed slightly more freedom, including some limited travel to the west - still communism but not as harsh as it had been. Because of goulash communism, I suspect the retribution period was less severe than elsewhere. Also, the Hungarians realized, to some extent, that the communists themselves were the ones who actually brought down their own system. The revolution was not violent; it was a revolution from the inside. It did not compare with Ceau?escu's Romania.

Q: Did we have a Peace Corps there?

COHEN: We did. As I noted earlier, I associated closely with the Peace Corps volunteers who were part of an environmental Peace Corps program. They were assigned to schools to teach environmental issues and work with non-governmental organizations. One volunteer assisted the Regional Environmental Center. The Peace Corps director or the deputy director may have perceived me as a threat; I understand why.

Q: Well, we have always tried to keep this separation between the Peace Corps and the embassies so the Peace Corps will not be looked upon as an espionage element.

COHEN: We agree. I pushed the envelope. I provided the volunteers with useful information. They benefited from awareness of what was going on throughout Hungary environmentally, U.S. policy, and hot button issues they might run across. I also provided EPA educational materials for them to utilize. In each of these environmental contingents, there were about eight to twelve volunteers. They were a great group.

Q: Where did things stand computer-wise when you got there? Had Internet arrived?

COHEN: Although there was no Internet, per se, some computer savvy embassy staff obtained email capability. One of our information management officers explained to me that he communicated to family members in the United States this way. He utilized a new company like CompuServe or Erols. It was almost beyond my comprehension.

The embassy's computer system was still Wang-based. It had progressed from the optical reader system and letter perfect headaches we faced earlier in Tegucigalpa. Cable drafting was easier. The embassy's most serious issue at that time was simply the chronic dislocation as a result of the building's complete top down reconstruction. During my tenure, I worked in three different offices on three different floors. Also, anything classified had to be prepared in the embassy's secure area where only a couple of computer terminals were located.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover in Hungary?

COHEN: There are a few things I do not want to miss. One semester, I taught a graduate level evening class at the Budapest Economics University. How did I get into that? One Friday evening, I attended the British Club happy hour in the basement of the British Embassy. Perhaps I had a few too many drinks. An expatriate who worked at the university enticed me to teach a graduate class on contemporary environmental issues. I prepared a curriculuand researched the issues! My course covered climate change, the economics of pollution, and similar topics. I did not follow a traditional Hungarian teaching style. In one class, I divided the students into Slovak and Hungarian sides and told each side to debate the Gabcikovo-Nagymaros controversy. The students found it easier to argue the Slovak position including defense of sunk costs, interesting enough. In another class, I arbitrarily assigned each student a country and asked that they argue their country's climate change policy. My interactive teaching technique was new to the students. Many were older, some were government bureaucrats. All seemed to enjoy the interactive engagement and role playing.

I worked closely with environmental groups throughout Hungary. Two months before I departed post, the Ministry of Environment presented me with a prestigious Hungarian environmental award, signed by Environment Minister Dr. Janos Gyurko. That was quite an honor. For my last Hungarian venture, my ministry friends took me on a private boat tour of the Danube River marshes in the southern part of the country. We had a wonderful time just boating around the Danube and splashing about in the river.

Q: As the environmental officer, you talked about the marshes. These are always fragile. What was happening there at that time?

COHEN: I mentioned the controversy with regards to the Gabcikovo Dam. The Danube River bisects the Hungarian basin. First, it flows east-south-east, then at the famous and picturesque Danube Bend, it turns dead south towards Budapest. The river forms the base for the country's hydrology. Hungarians are sensitive to the Danube's health, to the country's thermal waters, to water in general. The hydrologically sensitive Szigetkoz wetlands, rich in fauna and flora, follow along the Danube just at the point where the river enters Hungary from Slovakia. Hungarian environmentalists feared if the Danube flow was interrupted, which was going to happen when the dam water was channeled, the water table would drop. The wetlands would dry and the ecology change into grass and forest. Also, with less river flow, concentrated and more toxic pollution would collect in the wetlands area. This was perceived as an irreversible future disaster.

The environmentalists also feared an impact on Hungary's thermal waters, a true natural wonder. Alteration of the hydrology could negatively impact the hydrostatic pressure for Hungary's famous thermal waters, even far away in Budapest.

Hungary enjoys numerous wetland areas, such as the marshes near the Yugoslav border. Hungarians are sensitive about their rivers: the Tisza, the Drava, as well as the Danube. The GOH sought to protect these natural resources, particularly along the frontiers that had been off limits during the Cold War. For 50 years the border between Austria and Hungary and between Hungary and Yugoslavia had been patrolled and inaccessible. Small almost untouched ecosystems stretched the lengths of the borders. Hungarians supported the creation of bi-national parks along the undisturbed strips of land. The Regional Environmental Center promoted these parks, as well. A chunk of land along the Drava River with Croatia was targeted for protection.

Another example was the Tisza River which originates in Transylvania. It flows north into Hungary then makes a big U-turn and enters into the Danube in the south. Among other pollutants, the river suffered from high levels of arsenic. This got the Hungarians up in arms.

Q: You left Hungary when?

COHEN: I departed on August 1, 1994.

Q: And then where?

COHEN: I returned to Washington. My next assignment was in the Office of Environmental Policy (ENV), Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Scientific Affairs (OES). Nine years earlier, when Ambassador Negroponte returned from Tegucigalpa to be Assistant Secretary for OES, he asked me if I wanted to work in OES. I declined in 1985. Nine years later, I am entering OES.

My portfolio included the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) environmental side accords which had just been signed months earlier.

Q: NAFTA was between Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

COHEN: The environmental side accords to the NAFTA agreement were essential for congressional passage of NAFTA. NAFTA created two environmental institutions: the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) between the U.S. and Mexico headquartered in Ciudad Juarez; and the trilateral Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC) headquartered in Montreal. A third institution that dealt with labor issues was based in San Antonio. I was the State Department participant in the environmental organizations. I also covered environmental issues in the former East Bloc, including the Regional Environmental Center and non-NAFTA bilateral issues with the Canadians and Mexicans.

Q: You were doing this from when to when?

COHEN: I worked in OES/ENV from August of '04 to the summer of 1996.

Q: Let us talk about NAFTA and the Bureau.

COHEN: OES Assistant Secretary Elinor Constable had been the PDAS (Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary) in EB when I was staff assistant there in 1986. Deputy Assistant Secretary for Environment and Development Rafe Pomerance came to the Department from the World Resources Institute. In mid-1995, Eileen Claussen, a former EPA official who headed the White House Council on Environmental Quality, replaced Constable.

The environmental directorate within the OES Bureau, the "E" in OES, consisted of three offices. For purposes of explanation, I divide E into three colors. Blue dealt with climate change; green terrestrial ecology; brown was pollution. I worked in the "brown" office. I had met the office director, Day Mount, in Budapest.

The U.S. and Canada had an extensive environmental agenda. Most bilateral issues, including NAFTA-related ones, were "brown" in nature. The U.S.-Canada Air Quality Agreement received enormous political attention, particularly from Canadians. The Canadian Government cited U.S. source pollution from Midwest power plants as the culprit for elevated sulfur dioxide (SO2) and Nitrogen Oxide (NOx) levels in Ontario and Quebec. SO2 causes acid rain; NOx catalyzes ground level ozone, or smog. For shared water issues, the Great Lakes Boundary Water Commission was created around 1909. (The International Boundary Water CommissioIBWC - operated between the U.S. and Mexico.) There are many sticky water issues with both countries. For example, the Columbia River originates in Canada and flows south into the United States. Devil's Lake in North Dakota feeds a river that crosses the border three times, ending up in the Red River watershed on the Canadian side. The Great Lakes and boundary waters had significant contamination issues.

Fortunately, the U.S. and Canadian governments engaged seriously to resolve these issues. Both sides understood the other, sometimes too well. On the other hand, neighbors can make difficult negotiating partners. The Clinton Administration's relationship with the Canadian Government was pretty good. Environmental issues received plenty of attention. But bilateral environmental issues with Canada were enormously complex. On every topic there were lobbies, interest groups, politicians, and local citizenry on both sides.

Q: I am told one of the problems for so many State Department officials like yourself going into these issues with Canada is that the Canadians, your opposite number on the Canadian side, have probably been doing it for 20 years. Your counterpart knows the issues backwards and forwards and probably has a lot more backing from the Canadian government than we do from ours. Did this pertain?

COHEN: You are right. Not just with Canada; our negotiations with numerous countries fit that paradigm. Sometimes, dealing with Canada was a bit jarring. Except for the accent which I could barely detect sometimes, they are so similar to us. Negotiations between Canadians and Americans seemed akin to negotiations between GM (General Motors) and the UAW (United Auto Workers) labor union. The Canadians, I am certain, occasionally felt we were condescending. We frequently behaved like a big brother.

Q: Prickliness

COHEN: Yes, prickly. Although I am not an expert on U.S.-Canadian relations, I sensed a jaundiced view from both sides existed that differed from other bilateral relationships. There was Canadian pride at stake as well.

In addition to the U.S.-Canada relationship, NAFTA provided a trilateral system. Through the nascent Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) in Montreal, we endeavored to develop common environmental programming that would draw the three countries closer together. This included environmental protection projects, the collection and sharing of environmental data, the development of common approaches towards reducing pollution emissions, even the creation of the same environmental language. I arrived early in the commission's life. The organization was still trying to feel its way. The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) was still quite influentiamore so than under the Bush II administration. EPA Deputy Assistant Secretary Bill A. Nitze sincerely sought to foster a positive environmental agenda. His boss, EPA Administrator Carol Browner took a personal interest in NAFTA issues. The State Department generally played second fiddle to EPA on NAFTA issues. Today, EPA possesses only a shell of its former influence.

Our Mexican relationship was beyond prickly; occasionally, it could be downright nasty. The Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) channeled programmatic resources to Mexican entities along the border for environmental protection projects, for example, construction of sewage treatment plants which would reduce cross border pollution. The BECC did not have access to a lot of money. It was an institution with an important mandate but was underfunded. The Mexicans resented, even more than the Canadians, the apparent intrusion of Uncle Sam onto their territory and sovereignty. Generally, Mexico has weaker environmental controls and standards than the U.S. Much border pollution affecting U.S. communities originated in Mexico. With Canada, the U.S. side appeared to deliver more pollution than it received. In our dealings with Mexico, the perception remained, whether true or not, that the U.S. was a net recipient of air and water pollution. Frankly, all sides were guilty of polluting the frontiers. Texan power plants emitted huge quantities of SO2 and other pollutants. But the U.S. chose to view itself as "downwind" from Mexico. And sewage problems clearly were more extensive on the Mexican side.

EPA was the lead agency on environmental issues. No funding for environmental projects came through the State Department budget. But we could do some things that were progressive. In 1995, at the behest of interest groups in El Paso, Texas, and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) an NGO based in Washington - the State Department weighed whether to enter negotiations with Mexico on a proposal to create a bilateral air quality management district over the common air shed of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. Texans believed, with justification, that air pollution coming from Juarez prevented El Paso from attaining EPA Clean Air Act standards. El Paso was deemed a serious "non-attainment area" for ground level ozone, carbon monoxide, and particulate matter. EDF proposed a bilateral mechanism to enlist public participation in addressing common air issues in the El Paso-Ciudad Juarez air basin. The concept proposed by EDF would allow local citizens and the municipalities of both communities, NGOs, businesses, etc., to collaborate in the design of air pollution reduction mechanisms. From our side, we hoped the air quality management district could help El Paso meet its obligations under the Clean Air Act.

Although the two countries already had numerous environmental accords, the proposal was cutting edge. Between local U.S. and Mexican authorities, no environmental agreement of this type had been attempted. Working with EDF, other USG agencies, the lawyers in the State Department Legal Bureau (L), I formulated the concept for inter-agency approval. Most important was State Department seventh floor sign-off for authority to negotiate. Following months of work, we received approval from State's senior leadership. After a couple rounds of negotiations in Washington, El Paso, and Mexico City, we completed an agreement for the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso Air Quality Management District. I am proud of that accomplishment. I have not kept track since of its accomplishments. Air pollution in El Paso remains pretty bad. At least the agreement provides local citizens in Chihuahua, West Texas, and New Mexico a forum to resolve common environmental air pollution issues.

When I traveled to El Paso, I took advantage of the opportunity to visit Carlsbad Caverns. A caving colleague was a park ranger at Carlsbad. He gave me a private nighttime tour of the cave. I also visited Big Bend National Park. The park superintendent introduced me to the serious environmental issues he faced. Big Bend suffered from severe visibility impairments. Some days you could see over one hundred miles. On other days, visibility might be a quarter of that, or less. The haze was considered among the worst in the entire U.S. National Park Service. When you think of Big Bend National Park, what do you think of?

Q: Out in the wilderness I will bet.

COHEN: And you also think of clean air and amazing vistas.

Q: Yes.

COHEN: For Big Bend, visibility is the major attraction. The visibility impairment issue at Big Bend National Park had become a severe headache. The park measured visibility impairment in terms of how far you could see during so many days. Before air pollution, a normal vista reached out to 140 miles. On severe impairment days, it would be down to 20 miles or less. Where was this haze coming from? In the middle of nowhere why was the air so dirty? The park authorities suspected a large coal burning power plant across the Rio Grande in the Mexican state of Coahuila. The Mexicans denied that the plant was responsible. They cited coal power plants in Texas as the true culprit. The deliberations were contentious and nothing was resolved during my tenure in ENV. To retrofit Mexico's power generation facility with SO2 scrubbers and other particulate mitigation equipment was an expensive proposition for the Mexican Government. Nor were the Texan plants innocent of causing air pollution. It was a thorny issue.

The park superintendent and I discussed this and other problems. From Big Bend Park we crossed the narrow Rio Grande in a small boat. On the Mexican side existed a very small isolated village called Boquitas. Boquitas was nowhere near Mexico's electricity grid. The locals and the park superintendent proposed running a single electricity power line across the Rio Grande to supply the village from the United States. This would seem to be pretty simple and cheap. However, any cross border infrastructure, a pipeline or a transmission line, requires all sorts of approvals. In this case, the FERC, the Federal Electrical Regulatory Commission, had to concur. The State Department had to approve a negotiated bilateral agreement. I pushed forward the proposal to deliver electricity to this village. At one time, the inhabitants of Boquitas optimistically constructed pylons from the village to the river's edge in anticipation that the electricity would come. By the time I left ENV, an agreement had not been completed and the village had not received electricity. Although the issue was so small, negotiating an agreement and doing all the paperwork was viewed as daunting.

Q: Regarding Canada; some say the Canadians complain about the Midwest tall stacks which pollute Quebec or whatever. Others say the Canadians have also done the same thing, emitting pollution which ends up in the United States. Was there reciprocity in pollution?

COHEN: The United States is many times more densely populated than most of Canada. The sheer volume of our emissions of various gases and pollutants overwhelmed the Canadian sources, or so the Canadian Government claimed. On a per capita basis for electricity usage and emissions, Canada surpassed the United States. Canada possesses a colder climate. This means more heating. Generally, Canadian automobiles were no more fuel efficient than American automobiles. Canadian power generation plants were generally no cleaner than American power plants. However, the prevailing winds usually carried air pollution from the U.S. to southern Canada. Some Canadian-source air pollutants crossed from southern Canada into New England and New York State on the same wind patterns.

A particularly sticky situation concerned twin cities Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario, separated only by the St. Clair River. Auto emissions emanating from the Detroit metropolitan area crossed into Windsor and contributed to the city's elevated ground level ozone. When prevailing winds shifted, Windsor contamination floated into the U.S. The Canadian side argued the primary sources of the NOx which caused Windsor's elevated ozone were United States in origin. The Canadians, I felt, made a good case. But the case was not enough. Canadian and U.S. air quality standards were not identical. The issue involved the measurement tools of U.S. Clean Air Act and EPA regulations versus the Canadian ones. What lever would the U.S. Government utilize to impose emissions restrictions on domestic sources? The United States was not going to reduce its emissions simply because the Canadian Government wanted us to do so. Ultimately, the Clinton Administration considered various mechanisms. Some U.S. power plants would have to be retrofitted. Cap and trade schemes were considered. It was a laborious process and patience was being stretched. The controversy was little different from that between Hungary and Slovakia over the Gabcikovo Dam. When the Bush II administration arrived, I suspect the discussion process ground to a halt.

Q: Did Congress impact on you and work?

COHEN: Not at my level and not directly in our negotiations. Congressional interest was unavoidable, particularly from border state congressman. However, I did not observe dramatic congressional entanglement over the Canadian-U.S. environmental relationship at anywhere near the hyperactivity over bilateral economic and trade issues such as softwood lumber and fishing. In my experience, U.S.-Mexican border environmental issues generated more emotional angst than the U.S.-Canadian border. The U.S. side felt it was at the receiving end of Mexican environmental largesse. The Canadians felt they were more at the receiving end from us.

Q: You said the EPA was carrying most of the water before this.

COHEN: For the NAFTA environmental side accords.

Q: Did you get any feel for OES in this regard?

COHEN: Deputy Assistant Secretary Rafe Pomerance's focus was climate change, almost to the exclusion of other issues. On climate change, he was perhaps a decade ahead of his time. The successor to Assistant Secretary Elinor Constable, Eileen Claussen, came over from the Council of Environmental Quality where she worked closely with Vice President Gore. Al Gore, even then, viewed climate change as the preeminent issue facing the planet. The linear progression to the very top energized the bureau, at least on climate change.

Bilateral air quality issues, the NAFTA side accords, and the myriad of other air, water, and solid waste issues received some but not full concentrated attention from OES Bureau leadership. It was simply bureaucratic reality. Not everything can receive priority attention. And the priority at the time was climate change. EPA was not doing a bad job. It had good leadership, a talented and dedicated staff, and a mandate from the administration. Compared to what came later during the Bush administration, the 1990s were the heyday of USG institutional efforts to address the environment. State Department held the lead on some issues. We cooperated very closely with EPA and other agencies. Personal relationships were good.

Moving away for a moment from policy, I will relate one funny incident. Its another elevator story. In mid December1995, the U.S. government faced a "shut down" following the Republican Congress' Draconian political showdown with the administration over the budget. One day before the "furlough" that would close the government, perhaps for weeks, I was at EPA headquarters for meetings with the Mexicans. I was escorting a Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs delegation. As a statement for that day, I wore a necktie with the Three Stooges dressed in golf garb. We entered the EPA elevator to go to the upstairs meeting. EPA Administrator Carol Browner rushed onto the same elevator. The elevator doors closed and she looked at my tie. She began to crack up. She quickly regained her composure - she actually knew the Mexicans well. It must have been a slow elevator. "I guess you are wondering why I am laughing," she said. The Mexicans did not know about the Three Stooges. The Administrator tried to explain who the Three Stooges were. Little things like that typified EPA; I felt comfortable wearing a Three Stooges tie there. I would not have done so at other agencies. I imagine EPA during the Bush administration was a less gregarious place.

I wish the State Department had paid a bit more attention to environmental issues, but that was a selfish attitude on my part. We were doing the right stuff and had some positive impact.

Q: In mid-1996 you left OES.

COHEN: Yes. In 1996 I was assigned to a different realm, the Office for the Coordinator for Assistance to the Newly Independent states, S/NISC. The office came directly under the Secretary of State. The Assistance Coordinator, Ambassador Richard Morningstar, was a political appointee in charge of all U.S. Government assistance to the former Soviet Union.

The office had been created three years earlier. In the mid 1990s, total UGS assistance to the former Soviet Union was around $1 billion annually. Ambassador Morningstar was a successful businessman from Massachusetts. He took his role as assistance coordinator seriously; he wanted everyone to understand that he was in charge. He insisted his title be clearly defined as coming directly under the Office of the Secretary, and not one of the State Department undersecretaries. His line of reporting went straight up to Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott and the Secretary. He kept a tight reign over other USG agencies.

Morningstar brought to the job a skill set quite complementary to that of the Foreign Service. First, he possessed strong political ties to the Democratic Party. He was sincere and dedicated to his mission. He worked hard, believed in face-to-face meetings, and traveled frequently to the region. He coordinated hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance funds with agencies as diverse as USAID, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), the Department of Commerce, etc. Each agency had its own agenda, its own particular interests, and its own culture. Moreover, even though the pot of money was quite large, it was fairly limited given the demands on it. Decisions had to be made regarding the allocation of funds among the NIS countries. How much would Russia receive, how much for Ukraine, Armenia, Kazakhstan? Some programs were regional in nature, further complicating the allocations. Congress imposed innumerable earmarks. Dealing with Congress took deft. The Republicans were in charge of both houses of congress. Ambassador Morningstar was not afraid of working with Congress. On the other hand, he realized he had to play the game, particularly with those in Congress, including the staffers on the appropriations committees, who carried inordinate clout. He built relationships with these individuals, more than seasoned Foreign Service officers usually do. The agencies respected him and, I suspect, feared him. Given his mandate I think he was fairly successful.

He also had a very good deputy, William Taylor, who a few years later went on to become coordinator for assistance to Afghanistan and then director of the Iraq Reconstruction Office in Baghdad. In May 2006, he became ambassador to Ukraine. Bill Taylor was not a career Foreign Service officer. His background was military, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His personality complemented Morningstar's. He never tried to outshine Ambassador Morningstar. Bill Taylor presented the soft buffer, Morningstar the hard edge. Taylor was the kind of person people felt comfortable going to if they were uncomfortable going directly to Ambassador Morningstar. Taylor was the perfect intermediary with Morningstar. From that perspective the office functioned effectively.

The real monkey wrench was Congress. The assistance program to the NIS was highly politicized. Some in Congress preferred to channel money into threat reduction and disarmament, others represented agricultural interests. A large chunk of change was allocated for nuclear reactor issues, particularly to the program that would assure complete closure of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant operated since the collapse of the Soviet Union by Ukraine. The nuclear core of Chernobyl Reactor 4 had melted down and exploded in the early morning hours of April 26, 1986. The explosion spread a radioactive cloud all over the planet. In the mid-1990s, two of the four RBMK 1000 reactors at Chernobyl were still operating with the Ukrainian Government still striving to reactivate a third. The U.S. as part of a G-7 efforand I suppose everyone else on the planet - wanted Ukraine to close down the entire facility, including the two last functioning reactor units. The multilateral plan sought to construct a new sarcophagus to entomb Reactor 4 under an impervious structure. The existing sarcophagus had been erected in a rush against time by the Soviets.

This assignment was my initial exposure to contractors, although nothing like today where everything seems to be contracted out. There were fewer contractors back then. But the field was starting to grow. Companies looked to get into the action. Some fairly cockamamie, harebrained schemes were put on the table. Many got funded because someone had enticed earmarks out of Congress.

Q: Can you think of any ones that were particularly egregious?

COHEN: One firm certainly deserves a footnote. A small company called Selentech claimed to have developed technology that extracted radioactive isotopes strontium-90 and cesium-137 from milk. After Chernobyl, a huge swath of Ukrainian and Belarusian territory had been highly contaminated with these radioactive isotopes. Cattle and other livestock ingested the contaminated foliage. Milk from cows that grazed in the region contained high levels of strontium and cesium. The technology incorporated a centrifuge system which supposedly separated out the radioactive elements. Pellets within the centrifuge would draw out the contaminants. Somehow, Selentech sold the concept to someone in Congress. A Congressional earmark, a couple of million dollars, was set aside for demonstration of the Selentech technology.

Although the problem of radioactive milk was serious, I believed the entire Selentech concept was ridiculous. If the technology worked, a very big if that most experts seem to doubt, who would purchase "decontaminated" milk? Would the fact that the milk had been "decontaminated" be kept hidden from the consumer? Plus, even if the technology worked, the cost of decontamination, assuming no heavy subsidies, blew apart the economics of the milk processing. The final cost of the "cleaned, decontaminated" milk was multiples above the value of the milk - even if there were consumers willing to purchase it. After introducing the system Selentech would benefit from sales of its patented pellets required for the isotope separation process to work. As the sole pellet supplier, the company then controlled the price. I viewed the whole proposal as a shell game. In a last resort, it was better policy and smarter economics to dump decontaminated milk and use the funds to develop dairy herds in areas that do not have contamination.

Ambassador Morningstar, to his credit, walked a tightrope between Congress and these earmarks. He did not fight every battle.

Q: You did this from when to when?

COHEN: I worked in S/NISC until August 1998. I was familiar with the SEED Act, the Support for Eastern European Democracy Act, assistance programs in Eastern Europe during the early 1990s. Major assistance levels to Eastern Europe began around 1990-1991; our assistance to the former Soviet Union did not begin to reach there until about two years after the Soviet breakup. One headache was how to allocate the funding. Congress threw huge sums of money at the NIS program. As with any new program, actual project development in the NIS took time. This created a heavy funding pipeline that put enormous pressure on the agencies to move the money quickly. U.S. agencies, particularly USAID, had no prior experience in the region. Few officers in the U.S. agencies spoke Russian. U.S. embassies in Moscow and elsewhere had never had USAID missions. Within the new NIS countries nascent embassies sprouted up. They often operated out of temporary embassy buildings. Local staff needed to be selected and hired. For any new institutions including embassies and aid missions, there is a teething period. You cannot start off from day one and expect to have a fully functioning mission with everything working like clockwork.

U.S. agencies with a huge funding mandate from Congress were feeling their way in a part of the world where they did not possess much experience. Most congressional appropriations had to be obligated within two fiscal years. If appropriated by Congress in FY 1995, the funding could be obligated until September 30, 1996. After that date, if the money was not obligated, it disappeared. This was an enormous burden on the agencies. The appropriated funds required swift movement. Perhaps the following year, funding would not be forthcoming from the Congress. Funds appropriated for one purpose might be re-obligated for something else.

We witness similar feast-famine assistance patterns today. Funds are shoved out the door, but because of the time limits for obligating the appropriations, much may not be well spent. By the time the NIS assistance missions became familiar with the local culture and developmental situation, expertise and competence well established, offices set up and the computer systems operating, coordination formalized with counterpart agencies and NGOs, by the time this all happened, then the window on the money started to shut.

Q: Appropriations?

COHEN: As you know, the real power of the purse is with the Congressional appropriations committees, not in the authorizing committees.

Before money was obligated by a federal agency, a request for final authorization/approval was sent to Congress. This was the CN or Congressional Notification process, a paper exercise to assure funds were being spent for the purposes Congress intended. Once a program was ready to move forward, we prepared a description of the specific program to be funded. All had to be done within the second fiscal year of the particular funds being utilized. The CN went to Congress. If no objection came from Capital Hill, the funds were obligated. The process was intended as a check and balance on the Executive Branch. Any Hill member, any staffer could put a hold on funds already appropriated. It took a lot of effort to get these Congressional Notifications up to the Hill within the narrow two year fiscal year timeframe.

Q: What was the title and functional description of what you were doing?

COHEN: The title is difficult to describe. I handled assistance programs specifically in the western NIS: Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. I monitored the economic development projects in these countries. Ukraine's was the major program. In the 1996-98 period, over a quarter of a billion dollars was provided annually to that country. The U.S. and Ukrainian Governments established the Committee on Sustainable Economic Cooperation, the SEC, as a bilateral mechanism for developing and managing the overall assistance program. I served as kind of a secretary for that committee. I monitored the environmental portfolio, the myriad nuclear issues, and energy. The individual agencies, EPA or Department of Energy or USDA, whomever, packaged the projects. Ambassador Morningstar, Bill Taylor chaired interagency meetings to hammer out our priorities and divvy up the funding pie.

Q: The State Department is used to having problems and getting the job done right away. But the other agencies and departments of the government take a longer, more leisurely approach to these things. It sounds like you had to crack a pretty heavy whip.

COHEN: Actually, that was not the case. All the agencies comprehended the budgetary mechanism at work here. They knew the calendar. The difficulties arose from the fact that people and Washington agencies gravitate to money. Like pigs to the trough; in this case the hogs were often U.S. Government agencies. The State Department may not always have a good track record leading the interagency process. Other agencies might conduct an end run on the State Department to get their favored projects approved by OMB (Office of Management and Budget) or whomever. Ambassador Morningstar knew the system. He attempted to nip any end runs in the bud. I believe he succeeded.

An Air Force Colonel in the office handled humanitarian issues. However, the Department of Defense was not engaged within S/NISC's coordination mandate. The S/NISC mission was non-security, except for some nonproliferation stuff. Better linkages would have been useful.

When I was in S/NISC, our assistance program to the NIS peaked. Coincidently, I was in Budapest at the height of our assistance focus on Central and Eastern Europe. Our interest in the NIS waned by the late 1990s. We had reached the plateau of our attention to the former Soviet Union. Then, budgetary reality hit home and the funding dried up. By 2000-2001 our attention on the NIS had dissipated.

Q: You mentioned Morningstar and his background. What about Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott?

COHEN: Talbott served as Deputy Secretary of State from 1994 until the end of the Clinton administration in January 2001. He led the Department's NIS policy machine, but he left the details of USG assistance programs to Morningstar. I believe Talbott's interests were more on the political side. As I said, Morningstar delivered the goods as well as he could.

The office itself was small. Ambassador Morningstar, his Deputy Bill Taylor and probably about half a dozen others. That was it. There were rival offices, USAID, the State Department's European Bureau (EUR) and a natural competitiveness. Complete bureaucratic victory was almost unattainable.

Q: You learned the terrain of the intergovernmental kingdom.

COHEN: And conveniently have forgotten a lot as well. Remember the famous dictum of Bismarck. If people observed how sausages are made, they would never eat them. If Americans realized how U.S. foreign policy is made, they would be shocked.

Q: From your perspective, did it work?

COHEN: Given whom we were working with - we are not talking about choirboys on the other side - I believe the answer is a tepid yes. Our NIS counterparts were communists, supposedly former or reformed communists. A new generation of dictators emerged from the collapsed Soviet Union, thugs really, like Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan, Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan, and Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. Yeltsin was probably the nicest of the bunch.

As I said, the development assistance budget for Ukraine exceeded a quarter of a billion dollars budget annually. That's a lot of money. Ukraine was at the time the fourth largest recipient of USG assistance, after Israel, Egypt, and, I believe, Colombia. The Ukrainian government was insincere and less than fully competent. For all the rhetoric of the Bush II administration about democracy, the Clinton Administration was no less serious with promoting democracy in these countries. A country like Ukraine, which reflected so much initial optimism, proved to be somewhat of a disappointment.

Q: This was, of course, before the Orange Revolution.

COHEN: Yes, this was before Ukraine's Orange Revolution of late 2004. Victor Yushchenko who became Ukraine's president after the Orange Revolution, was head of the Central Bank in the mid-1990s. He was an occasional visitor to Ambassador Morningstar's office. In Kiev, we participated in annual meetings of the aforementioned Committee for Sustainable Economic Cooperation, one of three committees established under a U.S.-Ukrainian Bi-national Commission rubric.

The Clinton Administration created a number of bi-national commissions as a means of escalating the most important bilateral relationships. The bi-national commission with Russia was called the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. A commission with China was just emerging. The one with Mexico was quite active. These commissions met at the cabinet level. In the case of the U.S.-Russia entity, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, the Vice President actively co-chaired the Commission with the premier. Can you imagine Vice President Cheney doing that?

I want to share one anecdote about the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. During a Commission plenary at the State Department's Loy Henderson Auditorium, the topic of the hour was health. Secretary Donna Shalala was there with her Russian counterpart. On the dais, the Russian premier seemed half asleep while plenary speakers droned on. During a discussion on HIV-AIDs, the premier suddenly perked up. He turned to the Vice President and asked a question with perfect gravity. "Can HIV be transmitted by kissing?" the premier asked. In total seriousness and commendable patience, Al Gore explained that despite much research, there was no evidence that HIV could be transmitted through kissing. In front of the entire plenary, Chernomyrdin seemed to exhale in relief. It was all we could do to keep from cracking up.

Although the Ukrainian commission was not chaired at such a high level, it was still perceived as a good mechanism for fostering closer bilateral cooperation. Under the Bush Administration, the entire bi-national commission system was essentially disbanded. In my view that was shortsighted. During the 1990s Ukraine was a high priority country for the U.S. Government. After 2001 Ukraine and these other countries seemed to fall off the USG's foreign relations map. I feel the bi-national commissions did have positive impacts. We helped build institutions. We encouraged the development of civil society institutions, including NGOs. We fostered sustainable development environmentalism, private sector investment. On the downside, while some reforms were successfully implemented thanks to our bilateral engagement, political reform was a mixed bag. Only when Ukrainians themselves objected to their regime were they able to formulate fundamental political change.

Q: Could you speak about Chernobyl and the effort to construct the sarcophagus over Unit Four?

COHEN: Chernobyl consisted of four RBMK 1000 reactor units, paired together in two control buildings. Units One and Three still operated in 1996 and produced electricity. Unit Two had been damaged by a fire in 1991 and was shut down. Throughout the mid 1990s, a number of small Level 0 and Level 1 incidents occurred in the two operating units, Unit One and Unit Three. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Government sought to restart Unit Two, perhaps to put more pressure on the G-7 to cough up money. Ukraine insisted it required every megawatt the Chernobyl facility produced. The two functioning units supplied around six percent of the country's requirements.

Containment of Unit Four, the reactor which exploded and melted down in April 1986 was our primary concern. Amazingly, Unit Three abutted Unit Four. Nothing but a wall separated the two. The quickly constructed Soviet-era sarcophagus was deteriorating rapidly. As a result of radioactivity released in 1986, the entire region around Chernobyl was completely depopulated. This was the exclusion zone and included southern Belarus. In the shadow of the nuclear plant, the abandoned city of Pripyat where Chernobyl's workers lived before the explosion, remained a ghost town. Outside the exclusion zone, fifty kilometers away, the town of Slavutych was constructed immediately after the explosion to house the survivors and the workers.

In the autumn 1996, a team from Washington visited Chernobyl. We spent one night in Slavutych and were bused to the power plant. Inside the Unit Four containment structure, radioactivity was extraordinary. No one from our group entered the destroyed Reactor Four containment building. Any visitor to the inside of the existing sarcophagus had to wear high level protection clothing and could remain inside only a couple of minutes. Even with maximum protection, a person entering the unit in a couple of minutes would be exposed to and receive a level of radiation that is allowable in a normal lifetime. Inspectors basically rushed in and rushed out.

We observed facility operations in the Reactor One control room. The primitive level of technology in the control room shocked me. Looking back, it was little different than what might be seen in a television episode of the Simpsons! The Soviet-era vacuum tube technology, the levers, knobs, and bare light bulbs seemed to date from the 1950s. I did not notice an electronic component in the entire control room. Contamination control, that is, access checks, was barely minimal - a long away from minimal U.S. standards for a nuclear facility. Control room engineers were smoking cigarettes. The cigarette smell pervaded the control room!

There was legitimate G-7 concern that the inadequate containment structure constructed in haste by the Soviets, would fail, perhaps even collapse. Although radiation leakage was minimal, a collapse of the dilapidated structure could launch a radiation cloud. Construction of a permanent sarcophagus, as I said, was a multinational effort. The U.S., the major EU countries, and Japan made up the G-7 team. Governments contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to the sarcophagus program. Given the existing radiation and the immense dimensions of the new sarcophagus structure, the program was a monstrous engineering undertaking. Ukraine's part of the deal was, essentially, the closure of Units One and Threand not restarting Unit Two.

A related challenge dealt with the Chernobyl workers. Thousands who lived in Slavutych were still employed at Chernobyl. The GOU was conscious of their pending unemployment. It sought our assistance to promote Slavutych to potential foreign investors. Frankly, that was a lost cause. What company would invest money in a town where potential workers were ill equipped and ill trained to do anything other than operate the Chernobyl nuclear power plant?

Q: Did nuclear powered naval vessels also intrude on your nuclear-related work?

COHEN: The question you raise principally concerns the decommissioning of nuclear powered ships, particularly submarines. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia could not sustain its nuclear navy. Much of its nuclear fleet was mothballed, tied to moorings in Murmansk and perhaps elsewhere. Some vessels were falling apart. Other ships had been scuttled. When the ships were scrapped, the reactors were extracted and dumped into the sea - a cheap but not wise way of disposal for a nuclear reactor. The USG and others pressed the Russians to dispose its nuclear reactors in a more environmentally benign method. Unfortunately, the amount of money required for proper decommissioning was enormous. Frankly, it was way beyond what donor governments were prepared to contribute.

Moving on to my next assignment, after S/NIC, I went back to the Economics Bureau (EB) where I had served during the 1980s as a staff assistant and in the Office of Development Finance (ODF).

My new assignment was in the Energy and Natural Resources Division of the Office of International Energy and Commodity Policy. My portfolio covered numerous regions. I monitored energy developments in East Asia, particularly China. I continued to work with Eastern European energy issues such as gas pipelines. My portfolio included the Paris-based International Energy Agency's Standing Committee on Emergency Questions (SEQ). The IEA had committees that handled various issues, including relations with non-member (mostly oil producing) countries and oil market issues. In 1999, I became involved in the millennium (Y2K) computer issue.

Q: Was the International Energy Agency under the umbrella of the UN?

COHEN: No. The International Energy Agency (IEA) was created by the major petroleum consuming countries following the oil supply disruptions of 1973-4. OPEC's oil embargo followed the October 1973 Yom Kippur War and had a catalyzing effect on OECD countries. The major industrialized countries which were also net petroleum importers banded together to create the IEA. Its primary mission was coordination of consumer countries to prevent future oil supply shocks. The 1974 Washington Agreement obligated IEA members to share information and sustain fuel stockpiles, either of crude oil or processed fuel, equivalent to at least ninety days of net imports. During a supply crisis IEA members may determine stock drawdown requirements and urge that countries release oil and fuel stocks to mitigate the economic impact of the disruption. The United States developed a crude oil storage system called the SPR, the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Utilizing huge underground salt mounds along the Louisiana-Texas coast, giant caverns were carved out by water injection. Crude oil was pumped into the cavities created in the salt mounds. Today, the SPR possesses a capacity of roughly 727 million barrels of crude oil. Current inventory is over 700 million barrels.

IEA member countries utilized different storage methods. Japan also used large scale crude oil storage. Some European countries calculated fuel stocks held by private companies as part of their strategic reserve. In some cases, processed fuel rather than crude oil was included in the reserve calculations. Regardless of the methodology, member nations target a fuel stockpile level equal to or surpassing ninety days of domestic consumption. In theory, if all petroleum imports were cut off, all the taps were turned off completely, IEA member countries would have at least 90 days of fuel stock imports on hand.

In reality, no consuming nation would run down its fuel stocks in such a straight line fashion, leaving zero fuel stocks at day 91. Stock draws would be conducted less dramatically. The intention is to calm oil markets during periods of extreme uncertainty. During the 1979-80 Iranian Revolution crude oil prices quadrupled. Had sufficient fuel stocks been available at that time, the IEA member countries might have agreed to stock releases to mitigate the economic impact of the oil market gyrations. But in 1979, the IEA was still a very young organization. Fuel stocks were nowhere near what were required to pacify markets. Given our overall dependence on imported oil, the IEA mission to create fuel stockpiles as a buffer for emergency situations was prudent indeed.

During the mid 1970s when the IEA oil stockpile mechanisms were created, crude oil prices were in the low double digits. The rise in crude oil prices means that filling the reserves becomes more expensive. However, crude oil already sitting in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve appreciates in value.

During one of my trips to Houston, I visited SPR's Big Hill Reserve in east Texas. Above ground except for pipes, a few storage tanks, and buildings, not much can be observed. The reserve is below ground. The SPR has been utilized a few times by the USG to quell market fears in the face of supply constraints. Its overall impact has been to reassure markets that crude supply is available from a drawdown if needed. Most recently, the SPR was utilized during Hurricane Katrina. In that instance, however, U.S. fuel shortages consisted primarily of processed fuel due to refinery outages along the Gulf Coast. European IEA members stepped up to provide the U.S. market with refined product. That ameliorated what would have been an even greater price spike in gasoline and other refined fuels. During the first Gulf War and during the second, the USG announced that stocks from the SPR would be available to the oil market. This reassured oil companies. In both cases, significant draw downs were not needed.

Q: Turning to another part of your responsibilities, where does China get its energy?

COHEN: Most of China's power production comes from coal, just like in the U.S. In the late 1990s China was moving rapidly from being a net oil exporter to a net oil importer. For decades, China enjoyed an oil surplus. There were a number of reasons for this. First, China utilized coal for its primary power generation. Second, transportation, the major user of oil products, was a relatively small portion of the Chinese economy. China had relatively few vehicles and few roads, despite its tremendous population. A large proportion of Chinese transportation was conducted by coal-fired locomotives and barges. Thus, China's energy intensity for oil was very low. Much of China's oil production came from shallow water wells in the Yellow, East and South China Seas.

During the 1990s, Chinese oil consumption rose at a tremendous clip. It was only a matter of time before the country crossed the threshold from being a net producer to net consumer. When that line was crossed, China's impact on global oil markets became very important indeed.

As a commodity, crude oil is "fungible." That is, a barrel of oil produced in Iran, for example, can wind up anywhere and is equal to a barrel produced in Venezuela or Russia. More or less, crude oil has a global price, assuming differences in viscosity, sulfur content, etc. As far as global markets are concerned, Iranian oil equals North Sea oil. Ultimately, it matters little from where a country's oil imports come. Production and consumption must be viewed globally, a lesson that many still have not fathomed. China's entry as a major oil importing nation turned the global market on its head.

Moreover, for China oil is a strategic, not just a market issue. The U.S. receives crude oil from a number of sources. If Iran embargos oil exports to the United States, its oil would go to someone else, releasing oil from other sources that theoretically could come to the U.S. China, I sense, does not trust this global mechanism. The Chinese Government sought special deals with Russia and Kazakhstan. In recent years, China invested significantly in Sudan's oil production despite human rights questions there and various sanctions regimes. China wants Sudan to become a secure source of crude oil, regardless of the global market. Another part of the Chinese view of oil imports concerns transportation routes. To move Middle East crude to China, oil tankers transit the Straits of Malacca. An interruption in the straits would have a potentially devastating impact on China's supply. The Chinese prefer to have strategic options. The construction of pipelines to carry oil from Russian and Central Asian oil fields are viewed as a serious option.

China also seeks access to natural gas. If China was not ready to absorb natural gas imports, it could serve as a conduit country for natural gas from Siberia or Kazakhstan to South Korea and Japan. During the late 1990s, various gas projects were being considered. U.S. companies sought Chinese contracts to construct pipelines, etc. But there was a catch. U.S. companies feared, with justification, that the Chinese would steal or copy proprietary corporate technology. The various natural gas and pipeline projects utilized U.S. technology that could easily be duplicated by the Chinese who then might compete with the U.S. corporations. This scenario was well recognized. But the market potential was just too attractive for U.S. companies to stay away. So, various U.S. companies tripped over each other to get into the Chinese market.

Q: Did you get involved with this?

COHEN: Yes. Some U.S. companies sought deepwater concessions in the Yellow Sea, similar to deepwater exploration and production in the Gulf of Mexico. Other companies sought opportunities to construct various pipelines. The two countries created the U.S.-China Oil and Gas Forum to promote energy-related investment in China. During my tenure, the Forum met three times, in Beijing, Honolulu, and Houston. The companies utilized these events to promote themselves to the Chinese. Perhaps it was a bit naï¿½ve of corporations. While U.S. companies had a somewhat short term view of commercial opportunities, the Chinese possessed a long term view of energy supply and security. The eagerness of U.S. companies may have worked against them.

I will present one story which says much about the company Enron. During the Oil and Gas Forum at Rice University's James A Baker III Institute in Houston, the U.S. energy companies agreed beforehand to deliver consolidated joint presentations. This was important since many of the companies were competitors for contracts in China. Each company was responsible for various slices of the presentations. The companies agreed among themselves that no company would seek to gain a proprietary angle. Exxon, Chevron, Texaco, Unocal, Conoco, etc. represented only the industry as a whole, not themselves. All the companies complied with this. That is, all complied with delivery of generic presentations until Enron delivered its presentation. Plastered throughout their Power Point slide show, in violation of the spirit of this agreement, was the "Enron" symbol. The other companies were livid. Less than two years later, Enron was history. Some of the corporate participants present at the 1999 Houston Oil & Gas Forum, I am sure, viewed the Enron collapse as poetic justice.

Electricity deregulation was another hot-button issue. To allow electricity consumers to choose their own electricity plan and company was almost revolutionary. In the U.S. electricity sector deregulation was moving forward state-by-state. In early 2000 USG and Japanese teams discussed electricity deregulation. The U.S. side presented California as a model for successful electricity deregulation. In Tokyo, the USG expounded the benefits of electricity deregulation to assure market competitiveness.

When we came out of the discussions with the Japanese, the head of our delegation asked me to brief a U.S. company back at the embassy. I returned to the embassy and met with a representative from Enron. I provided a personal briefing of what had just transpired. I was astounded. To come out of bilateral talks and immediately be asked to brief a singular company reflected real corporate influence. In the late 1990s Enron was the tail that wagged the government's dog. It seemed to get exactly what corporate headquarters wanted which were the details of the talks. Few other companies, I imagine, were capable of pulling that off.

Q: Just a little later, California went through a crisis with its electricity and Enron's fingerprints were all over it.

COHEN: That event began to occur within months of our discussions with the Japanese. All hell broke loose in California. Energy deregulation encouraged utility suppliers to ration electricity rather than expand production. State regulators capped prices at pre-deregulation price levels. In theory, the regulators felt, competition would drive retail prices lower for consumers. But because of the price caps, companies saw no reason to expand generation capacity. When energy demand rose, utility companies were forced to go to the spot market to purchase electricity. This is where Enron exploited the market. Enron tightened the wheeling of electricity and sent prices charged to the utilities through the roof. Not only were Enron's fingerprints were all over that event, the negative fallout severely damaged electricity deregulation efforts. Major California utilities went bankrupt and rolling blackouts in California occurred on and off for about a year.

My portfolio included the delivery of a joint Economic Bureau (EB)-Foreign Service Institute (FSI) course entitled "Oil and Gas Industry." The course had been on-going since the early 1990s. Foreign Service Officers going to assignments with significant oil and gas issues spent one week in Houston, Texas. The Houston portion of the program was handled by the Petroleum Equipment Suppliers Association (PESA), a trade association dedicated to the oilfield services and equipment sector. Each July, twenty-five, mostly Foreign Service Officers but some officials from other USG agencies, travel to Houston. The group visits a wide range of oil sector companies: drillers, oilfield analysis, bit makers, pipeline manufacturers, and the majors such as Halliburton. The students travel to Galveston to tour an oil refinery and/or visit an off-shore rig on display in Galveston Bay. The program introduces FSOs to an industry with a major presence throughout the world. At post many officers benefited from familiarity with the issues and the particular companies. We left Houston with a bunch of cards for our rolodexes.

I escorted the Oil & Gas Industry class to Houston in July 1999. We visited Enron headquarters. The company treated us like royalty. We were taken to the corporate gas trading floor, a vast floor of traders and gadgetry engaged in the purchase and sale of natural gas. From behind a pane of glass, we observed the internal market operations for the supply of natural gas throughout the U.S. I discovered later that the trading floor was somewhat of a Potemkin village set up for visitors like us. Meanwhile, Enron continued to be a darling of Wall Street. Its stock price peaked in mid-2000.

Q: For researchers, Enron was basically a gas trading company, was it not?

COHEN: Before its bankruptcy in 2001, Enron was an "energy" company, engaged in far more than just "trading natural gas." But their bread and butter, I believe, was the gas market. Enron was involved in a variety of power generation schemes throughout the Third World. I will get to one example later when I talk about my next assignment. Enron had their fingers in many things including electricity deregulation. The electricity market is active every second of every day. It cannot rest since electricity is a commodity that cannot be saved or stored.

Q: You cannot put it in a salt mine.

COHEN: It is not like crude oil.

Q: Use it or lose it.

COHEN: You use it or lose it, literally. It is a constant market. If the weather is excessively hot in one part of the country, power consumption there will rise as air conditioning usage increases. More electric power must be directed to that area. How do you balance electricity supply and demand to assure uninterrupted power reaches the end-user? A constant battle takes place to assure that voltage remains constant. As consumers we tend to overlook this complexity. Enron was a vital cog in the power supply machine that kept this electricity market functioning. Unfortunately, the company placed itself in a position of monopolistic control whereby it basically could determine the delivery of electricity at critical moments and affect prices. All it takes is one system failure, either a mechanical failure such as the great northeast blackout of 1965 or a market hiccup. The system can collapse like dominoes. It does not take much. I was not in California when the spike in electricity prices brought down the entire system. That was the beginning of the end for Enron.

One thing about Enron, the folks there knew how to schmooze. Each Halloween, the EB energy office hosted a party. The one company that never failed to attend was Enron. Their government relations representative always attended, although he never bothered with a costume. The company knew the ins and outs of government relations better than any other. I should say it knew how to manipulate government, push the right buttons, and pay off the right people.

Q: For somebody looking at this, Enron collapsed shortly thereafter. It was a huge collapse, a tremendous scandal. The reverberations are still going on six-seven years later.

COHEN: The reverberations will continue for a long time. The company had something like 22,000 employees when it declared bankruptcy. Thousands lost their pensions. Many suppliers got bilked. Meanwhile, even before the final collapse, senior executives with inside information sold their stock which accelerated the stock's collapse. Most stockholders took it on the chin. Enron leadership was indicted on a variety of fraud charges. The overall economic impact of Enron's collapse was enormous. It jaded many to the deregulation theme and set back electricity deregulation at a time when markets were mature enough to handle it. Some states, Pennsylvania for one, had become quite adept at electricity deregulation. So Enron's fall tarnished electricity deregulation at a time when it looked like it deregulation might be coming around.

Q: Well going back to your parish, how about Indonesia?

COHEN: My portfolio in the energy office focused on petroleum consumer country issues. Indonesia being a major petroleum producer and OPEC member was not one of my countries. There were two energy offices: the Office of Energy Producing Countries (EPC) and the Office of Energy Consuming Countries (ECC). I was part of the latter.

Q: Were red lights flashing for dealing with China?

COHEN: We perceived the oil market train coming down the tracks ahead of most others. China's massive economy was growing my leaps and bounds. The government was accumulating the world's largest cash reserves. The IEA warned that China was moving rapidly from being a net oil export producer to a major net oil importer and that this would hit markets significantly. China's petroleum consumption was growing at an order of magnitude whereby it would become the world's second largest petroleum importer, second only to the United States, within a few years. This was quite evident to those of us working on this issue. U.S. energy companies, as I explained, were eager to enter the Chinese market. China required additional crude oil and natural gas production capacity, new pipelines, refineries, and LNG facilities. As China started to import major quantities of oil, the country's interests, supposedly, were marrying up with USG interests. As major petroleum importers, we were in the same boat. That is one reason why the U.S. companies and we believed we could work closely with them. On the other hand, dramatically more Chinese oil consumption potentially meant tighter supply markets for all others.

The entry of China into the import side had a profound effect on policy and prices. It was inevitable. China's rapid economic growth and surging oil imports contributes an inflationary effect on global petroleum prices. The Chinese wanted U.S. technology to address the limitations in their energy infrastructure and production capacity. But China was a difficult dance partner for the U.S. companies.

I understand that the Chinese perceive their strategic interests with a long term vision. The GOC weighs extending control over the South China Sea. Despite the competing sovereignty demands of at least five countries in the South China Sea: the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Indonesia, China views the sea as its birthright. Experts felt the South China Sea potentially holds a tremendous amount of petroleum resources. Even if it takes fifty years or longer, China believes it is a strategic necessity to gain control over the South China Sea, island by island, sea mount by sea mount. A myriad of rocks and shoals litter the South China Sea. Each remains a target for possession.

There are islands throughout the South China Sea. Taking the rules of the Law of the Sea, boundary lines are drawn from inhabited locations. If an island or overgrown rock is only an acre in size, nothing habitable, the Chinese still exercise a policy of encroachment. Its efforts are incremental and do not attract much attention. The Chinese perspective is awfully long and they are patient.

China moved into Sudan when other companies were reluctant or prevented from doing so because of various governmental sanctions regimes. China targets non-traditional oil suppliers such as Sudan as a strategic necessity to assure supply. This thinking may be a bit out-of-date. Crude oil is a global market, as I noted. It matters little where a barrel is produced as long as that barrel reaches the consumer. Country contracts are something we observed in the 1970s. China's use of Sudan as a kind of strategic oil stockpile does not seem completely logical. But who am I to question China's long-term energy security strategy?

Q: How did you find the Chinese?

COHEN: The Chinese were masterful in giving the non-answer. From the Chinese Government, U.S. companies sought a thumb up - or thumb down. They desired clear direction, specific answers to take back to corporate headquarters. The Chinese craftily left companies in the dark, wondering what was going on. In addition, U.S. companies feared that the Chinese would insist on the sharing of critical technology. A company which agreed to such a stipulation put its proprietary future at risk.

There are a few other topics worth discussing.

As I mentioned, I collaborated closely with the James A. Baker III Institute, Rice University, and with PESA. The Institute hosted a number of meetings with the Chinese and others, symposia, etc. A very fruitful relationship seemed evident between the Baker Institute and the Clinton administration. The two worked well together. I do not know if that collaboration extended into the Bush Administration.

During a personal 1999 visit to Pittsburgh, I met staff at the National Energy Technology Laboratory located there. I suggested that the lab and the State Department collaborate on a course similar to the Houston program. The NETL folks agreed wholeheartedly. EB and FSI enthusiastically endorsed the idea. As a result, we crafted a one week program focused on non-petroleum hydrocarbons, nuclear, fuel cell technology, clean coal technology, renewable power, and power sector issues. The five day course was called the "Coal and Power" course, centered in Pittsburgh. The course has been held every year since 2000.

In collaboration with the Alaska Department of Commerce, we also crafted a one week field study course in Alaska to study energy issues pertinent to that state. The class was limited to seven or eight students who had already attended the Houston course. The lucky group visited the North Slope, the Alaska pipeline, and the terminal at Valdez. Unfortunately, the course is not being held anymore.

Q: Did you feel that anybody in Economic Bureau was making the scientific calculation?

COHEN: Even though science and technology often is performed within or under the econ section at post, it is generally treated as an embassy step child or orphan. A science officer at post performs a distinctly different role than economic officers. I am not sure this is well recognized by some State Department leadership. Unfortunately, many economic officers view science and technology as beneath the attention of the econ office. Science and technology issues would be better served if S&T officers continued doing science work over a number of tours. With the mid-1990s demise of the science cone, this is no longer feasible. In my view, science expertise is not being well developed in the Foreign Service.

If the State Department wants a cadre of officers skilled in environment, science, and technology issues, it should encourage a focus on science and allow promotion opportunities not reliant on economic experience. Without a science cone, the incentive for most economic cone officers to do science work is weak. When up for promotion, economic-coned science officers do not easily compete on a level playing field with officers coming out of economic jobs. Today, science officers can be disadvantaged by being thrown into competition for promotion with economic officers.

Just prior to the end of this assignment, I remarried in June 2000. My wife and I knew we would be going overseas. It was unclear where we would go. I wound up becoming economic counselor in Nigeria. When I mentioned this assignment to my fiancï¿½, it appeared she would divorce me before we even got married!

Q: Could you give a quick background on your wife?

COHEN: I met Marla in early 1997. At the time she worked in the civil service doing Pakistan/Afghanistan economic issues. We each had two children almost exactly the same ages. The two girls, Rebecca and Abigail, were just two month apart in age. The boys, Andrew and David, were sixteen months apart.

The assignment to Nigeria was daunting. It required me to jump into a new and different region, into Africa, although Marla has been a Peace Corps volunteer in Botswana in the 1980s. We married on June 11, 2000 and left for Africa in early September. The economic counselor was based in the embassy. However, one week after we arrived in Lagos, the embassy was formally transferred to Abuja where, for some time, the smaller portion of the U.S. mission had been located. The larger part of the mission including all the administrative support services and a number of the key positions remained in Lagos. Lagos is Nigeria's commercial capital. My new job quickly developed a split personality.

There are many Foreign Service Officers who during their careers have traipsed through Lagos. Quite a few served their time as economic officers. Lagos would turn out to be one of my best jobs in the worst surroundings.

Q: You were there from 2000 until when?

COHEN: We served there from September 2000 to June 2002. One may say that until you have been to Africa, you have not had a real Foreign Service experience. And unless you have been to Nigeria, you really have not had your African experience. And until you have been to Lagos, you have not quite been to Nigeria. Ultimately, Lagos is one of those posts that really can affect those who served there.

Q: Tell me why.

COHEN: When we think "Foreign Service," Africa frequently comes to mind. Its Third World developing country cultures are so different from our own. Nigeria is the engine for West Africa and a very important country for us, for its petroleum production. Its culture and business sectoand its criminal elements - dominate much of Africa. One quarter of Africa's population reside in Nigeria. The country displays many of the schisms seen elsewhere. It is divided by religion, Christians and Muslims; by regional and ethnic identity, North-South and East-West divisions. Large ethnic groups, the Ibo, the Hausa and the Yoruba dominate smaller tribal cultures. Its people speak multiple languages. Nigeria is very much a divided/ united country. Lagos is in some ways very cosmopolitan and very influential. In other ways, it is the personification of the "heart of darkness."

Nigerians are extremely bright, outgoing, cultured and socially enjoyable. They can also be conniving, even Machiavellian. Some of the world's premiere criminal gangs are Nigerian. Nigerians essentially invented Internet fraud. In Nigeria it is called 4-1-9. This refers to the statute in the country's legal code which relates to the crime of advanced fee fraud. That is what the Internet fraud is all about. The typical solicitation reaches out to the unsuspecting target. It offers the possibility of fantastic riches, millions of dollars, in exchange for the assistance of the victim who hands over his bank account information.

From the day we landed until we departed post two years later, my wife and I locked up credit cards and other valuables in our office safes. We assumed any kind of electronic transaction in the country would be swiped. Without doubt Nigeria is a very dangerous place, although the security posture was not as high as say contemporary Afghanistan or Iraq. Mobility is extremely limited in Lagos; expatriates are restricted to two relatively small islands, Ikoyi and Victoria Island. Travel to the airport required an armored vehicle with armed escort. The trip to Murtala Mohammad International Airport was like a race in a Mad Max movie.

Q: Was this because of thievery or terrorism?

COHEN: Terrorism, no. Criminal behavior: carjackings, theft, mayhem, certainly. Nigeria at that time was not a terrorism-ridden place. This was out-and-out crime conducted with no ideological bent. The trip between the Ikoyi/Victoria Island and the airport on the north side of mainland Lagos was nerve-racking and revealing. I suspect driving techniques so prevalent now in Iraq and Afghanistan were perfected in places like Lagos.

Pardon the clichï¿½, Lagos is a teeming city, Africa's largest, densely populated with incredible, unspeakable poverty. It has suffered from decades of notorious corruption. When we arrived in 2000, the country had only recently emerged from a long dark dictatorship. The last dictator, Sani Abacha, died in June 1998. Semi-democratic elections - I will not say democratic but pseudo-democratiwere held in May 1999. A former army general and military ruler during the 1970s, Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba, was overwhelmingly elected president. I use the word democracy with small letters.

With Obasanjo's rise as a democratically-elected president, hopes for Nigeria were high in Washington. For over a quarter century, the USG possessed a very jaundiced view of Nigeria. The U.S.-Nigerian relationship had been particularly rocky during the tenure of Sani Abacha (1993-1998.) Now, times had changed. The USAID program was beefed up. I believe it reached an annual level of $100 million during our tenure there. President Clinton visited Nigeria a week or two before we arrived. His visit was warmly received by the Nigerian people.

Q: You spoke about having to be surrounded by armed guards.

COHEN: Marla and I were married in June. In September, we transferred to Nigerinot a place you would take anyone for a honeymoon! In fact, quite the opposite! From our perspective, the redeeming feature about Lagos was the American International School (AIS) which had a very positive reputation. Accredited classes at the school went through eighth grade. Our eldest at the time was in eighth grade. Our first year, we placed three children in the school. We were satisfied with the caliber of the education and the extracurricular activities. AIS provided a cocoon-like atmosphere for the kids. Frankly, if the international school is good, you can put up with a lot of crap on the outside. Many posts may seem like a nice place to live, but if the school is inferior, morale suffers. I would take the superior school and the inferior lifestyle, rather than vice versa.

The American International School of Lagos (AIS) was outstanding, in large measure because of the support of the foreign oil companies. Nigeria is Sub-Saharan Africa's leading oil producer and a very important supplier for the United States. International oil companies in Nigeria included Exxon and Mobil - soon to be merged - Chevron, Texaco, and, of course, Shell. The oil companies contributed generously to the school. Many teachers generally came from a particular school district in the Pacific Northwest. They possessed a high esprit de corps, important in an international school.

Outside of AIS and home, there was not much of a life for the children. Everything revolved around AIS. For parents, Lagos was a different matter. We had to deal with the city. Lagos is notorious for its awful traffic. I have been to Rome, Cairo, Mexico City, and I have seen bad traffic. But I challenge any place on the planet, except for perhaps Bangkok, to compare with a Lagos "go slow." A car could sit in the same spot for hours. The infrastructure had not improved in a quarter of a century.

Q: Despite the tremendous amount of oil revenue.

COHEN: Despite the billions that had been delivered to the government.

You know the adage about for want of a nail a shoe was lost, etc. In Lagos, I noticed one pothole, on the Victoria Island (VI) side, at the entryway ramp to the bridge between Ikoyi and Victoria Islands. It was a noteworthy pothole, maybe the size of a desk, and a foot deep. Cars slowed to a crawl to navigate it. That one pothole tied up traffic on the entire island. On VI, a small island with limited pavement, traffic patterns depended on that bridge. It caused a ripple effect. Because every car had to crawl through this one pothole, traffic elsewhere on the island came to a halt.

I described Nigeria as a land of extremely low hanging fruit. In AID parlance that means a small investment in the right things can have a large out-sized return. In Lagos and in Nigeria generally, proper infrastructure investment of minimal cost provided an almost infinite return on the investment. Think about the pothole. What kind of investment does it take to properly fill a pothole? And yet, fixing the pothole sped up commerce throughout Victoria Island. Most of the city's important companies and banks had their headquarters on VI. All the consulates and embassies were located there. For a minimal effort there was a big return. On the other hand, if infrastructure investment was performed poorly, good money was just thrown after bad. Corruption and ineptitude were so endemic. Things just did not get done.

I will give another example. When we arrived in Nigeria, I really did not understand how people existed in this culture. It just struck me as almost impossible for a typical Nigerian to live or get ahead. In the summer 2001, our section had a summer intern. I asked the intern to work with the economic section's FSN, Uzo Okafor, to conduct a field study. We came up with study parameters and questionnaires. The intern and the FSN went to various markets in Lagos to ask basic socio-economic questions of the local people. "How much do you earn, how much do you spend and on what, where do you live?" They were general questions.

We received questionnaires from surveys conducted at eight different markets throughout the city. Then we crunched the numbers. The results were most revealing. Many people - not a small percentage - claimed they spent more than they earned. Across the board, Lagos citizens affirmed they spent more than their income. Nigeria is not a country where consumers can run up credit card debt. So how did people live in this environment?

One consistent expense cited, which perhaps should not have been a surprise, was protection payoffs at the neighborhood level. Loan sharking was another high cost item.

We collected this data. The intern cared little about finishing the project and departed without investing any more effort in it. I took the myriad of information and compiled a report. The effort took at least a month. As you know, in the State Department, cables that are too long tend not to be read. A six-eight paragraph effort is about the right length in order to catch people's attention in the State Department. Well, I whittled this cable down to 42 paragraphs! It was a major think piece. I suspect no one else, neither the Consul General nor the DCM, was really excited about sending it out. But all the hard work had been done. For some reason, the Ambassador thought the intern wrote the damn thing. Finally, the cable was sent.

I doubt even the Nigeria desk cared much about it. Perhaps some analyst buried in the bureaucracy read it in its entirety. However, I received a kudos cable nonetheless. It came from Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. He said he "read it with great interest" and praised it for being "thoughtful and thought-provoking." He also commented that we provided a summer intern with a meaningful and useful project. It just goes to show that occasionally a lot of effort into a think piece cable does pay.

Q: It sounds like there was no functioning government.

COHEN: No, there was not. The federal government had moved to Abuja. Not surprisingly, Abuja became the center of attention and infrastructure construction. Lagos had infrastructure constructed 30, 40 years previously. That infrastructure was collapsing and there was no money going back in.

Second, the government did not provide services such as water, electricity, and sewage. If you wanted electricity, you got a generator. If you wanted water you had a well drilled or water delivered by tanker truck. As diplomats, we were fortunate. The Consulate provided a power generator and we received water and sewer service from trucks. Scores of Nigerian personnel supported us. The General Services office, the GSO, maintained and refueled the generators, managed the trucks and water tankers, and did everything else. There must have been thirty or more Nigerians behind each Foreign Service Officer just to maintain a certain standard of living.

Q: As an economic counselor you are supposed to send in economic reports. I assume that the economic statistics were a will o' the wisp or something.

COHEN: I had one serious challenge. I was based in Lagos; the embassy was located in Abuja with most Nigerian government offices. All the ministries were in Abuja, including the Central Bank. There were branch offices in Lagos, but the action was up north. Since most of the traditional government-to-government economic work was in Abuja, the two person economic section in Abuja covered much of that. Lagos was the country's commercial center and banking hub, not only of Nigeria but of West Africa. We collaborated with the Nigerian Stock Exchange, conferred with leaders of Nigeria's commercial sector, its banks, academics, think tanks such as the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), and the oil sector. Our primary national interest with Nigeria concerns oil. Lagos and Abuja were really two completely different missions.

Q: Were all revenues going to Switzerland?

COHEN: During the Abacha dictatorship, any money that flowed into Nigeria was quickly rotated out, including into Swiss bank accounts. With the arrival of "democracy" it was hoped that the country's income would be employed better. Under a democratic system, many believed the worst aspects of this massive corruption could be weeded out. Prior to assuming office, President Obasanjo had been a senior member of Transparency International. Some resources, although not much, were being properly spent. That pothole I mentioned was filled. There were many other potholes that required attention. Gradually, some infrastructure needs were being addressed.

However, when a bit of oil revenue entered the system, all of the key players from around the country, especially the governors of the thirty-six or so states, demanded their share. Revenue was divided between the central government and the states. I was never quite up-to-date how many states Nigeria has. The number kept increasing. I think there were 36. Each state had a governor, a bureaucracy, patronage, etc. All the politicians had their own scams and priorities. Substantial tension existed between the central government and the states over how to divide up the oil revenue.

I will add another ingredient to the complexity. Oil comes primarily from one region of the country, the coastal area of the Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. It is a region of intense poverty among ethnically diverse peoples amidst the oil wells and pipelines. Gas flaring lit the night sky. The local inhabitants felt entitled, deservedly, to a portion of this revenue being taken from their home region. They were embittered. Many conducted sabotage against the oil infrastructure. They figured why waste time negotiating with the government, a hopeless case. Instead, they made life miserable for the oil companies, an easier target. Oil workers suffered intimidation and kidnapping. Many were held hostage. Oil flows were disrupted. Locals tapped into pipelines, stole the crude oil and floated it out to barges. This was called 'bunkering.' From barges, the crude was transported to larger ships off-shore.

For the major oil companies with operations in Nigeria such as Shell, Chevron, Mobil (later-Exxon-Mobil), and Texaco, the country was an important source for crude, despite the difficulties. From West Africa, oil tanker reached the U.S. market more quickly and at less cost than from the Middle East. Nigerian oil came from the country's coastal region or from offshore platforms. A company with most or all of its production offshore avoided many, although not all, of the hassles simply because of the distance from land. The farther offshore the platform, the safer it was from attack by kidnappers who sought ransom from the companies. In a sense, the rougher the water, the safer the platform.

Nigeria produced over two million barrels of oil a day. Over the course of a year, that translates into a lot of revenue and profits, particularly when global oil prices are high. The oil companies are accustomed to operating in difficult political and security environments. Nigeria is not unique. However, the degree of difficulty gave the companies plenty of heartburn. In very few places, perhaps Aceh in Indonesia, did oil workers run such security risks. Where else did the locals tap into pipelines to extract the crude? Someone lights a match and 700 people get incinerated.

The consulate and the embassy engaged constantly with the oil companies and other oil sector authorities. We reported to Washington on the overall health of the oil sector. Nathan Flook, the junior officer in our section focused on energy issues. He and I traveled to the Niger Delta region and the offshore oil platforms.

I visited an oil flow pumping station operated by Chevron in the middle of the Niger Deltin the middle of nowhere! An American supervised many Nigerians. He was on station for 28 days, then had four weeks off to travel back to the U.S. Twenty-eight days on, 28 days off. He was the lone ex-pat. His life hung by a thread every day! If his workers were pissed at him, or upset with anything, they could kill him. The workers came from local "minority" ethnic groups: Itsekiris, Urhobos, Ijaws, Ibibios, Ogonis, Kalabaris, Efiks, Ikwerres, and Ilajes. There were never-ending rivalries and demands for corporate concessions. Strikes occurred for no logical reason. These pumping stations were essential to moving crude from the wells to the coast. In one report I described his job at the flow station as the world's most dangerous job! I cannot think of anything more dangerous than running a pump station in the middle of the Niger Delta.

Q: Were we seeing at the time any movement to nationalize the oil?

COHEN: Oil in Nigeria is already nationalized. It is owned by the government. The Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), created in 1977, managed the government's interest in the petroleum sector. The NNPC was not capable of sustaining crude oil production. If the Nigerian Government was incapable of preventing a highway from collapsing, how can it maintain and expand complicated oil sector infrastructure? NNPC took the rent, the crude oil royalties off the top. Even the most corrupt or jaded government officials comprehended that kicking out the multinational oil companies would kill the golden goose.

Q: Well, as you noted before, Nigerians are among some of the smartest people on earth. But I take it they were not training to be petroleum engineers.

COHEN: Some Nigerians held high positions within the multinational oil companies. The government insisted Nigerian citizens be placed in the upper corporate structure. However, for the most part their power and responsibilities were limited. Would corporate headquarters in Houston or London place much confidence with Nigerians in sensitive positions in Lagos? Doubtful. While Nigerians were employed throughout the companies, particularly at the staff level, and Nigerian engineers were common, at the highest managerial levels most Nigerians were figureheads. Among senior management, the politics became very thick. Would someone's brother-in-law, perhaps a complete incompetent, be placed in a position where he might damage operations or corporate reputation? Companies sought to marginalize incompetency. On display in the oil sector in Lagos were the tensions between company management and government. Perhaps the Nigerian leadership realized that it was best for ex-pats to run the companies. The divisions within Nigerian society, if allowed to seep further into the companies, could paralyze management and accentuate national tensions already existent.

Q: You speak about divisions in Nigerian society. The Hausa who are Islamic are in the north and the Ibos and Yorubas are in the south. How did this play out in the economy?

COHEN: I was more familiar with Ibos and Yoruba than with Hausa. I refer again to Cohen's first law. Embassies and consulates reflect the cultures in which they are located. What is the culture of Lagos? It is primarily, although not exclusively, Yoruba with some Ibo and a bit less Hausa. The Yoruba core culture is Christian and animist, more intellectual, somewhat commercial. Ibos were very trade and business-oriented. They seemed to dominate Nigerian commerce. The Hausa had little reputation for entrepreneurship. The embassy and consulate seemed to reflect this schism perfectly.

Q: At this point Lagos was the consulate?

COHEN: Lagos became the consulate general in September 2000. Abuja, located in the center of the country, retains more Hausa influence. I sensed the embassy culture seemed more bent towards Hausa, especially since many FSNs were from Hausa-dominated northern Nigeria. Embassies, as you well know, often develop clientitis. At the consulate in Lagos, a Yoruba-dominated region, we unconsciously were sympathetic to Yoruba positions vis a vis other groups. Being familiar with many Hausa, one might become sympathetic to or at least aware of Hausa perspectives. Of course, the opposite could occur with close proximity. Pity the Ibo who do not have a consulate in their southeastern Nigeria region. I do not claim. In my experience, officials tend to perceive issues as reflected from the people with whom they deal on a day-to-day basis.

Q: Was there much payoff going on?

COHEN: Absolutely. But in Nigeria there was never enough money to satisfy everybody. That would have been impossible. Under the dictatorship of Sani Abacha, the scope of corruption was beyond imagination. From 1999, under President Obasanjo, corruption had been reined in compared to the Sani Abacha regime. But graft was still enormous and it went very high up in the governmental hierarchy. Transparency International (TI), the international anti-corruption NGO founded in the 1990s, usually rated Nigeria at the very bottom or close to the bottom of its corruption index every year.

We in the west usually perceive corruption as an individual's peccadillo. However, in my experience, most corruption is institutional. It is structural. Accusing a particular person of being corrupt misses the point. The system is often corrupt. For one to survive and even thrive, corrupt practices must be employed to some extent. Salaries are inadequate. Rent seeking opportunities are too tempting. Families, clans, and tribes must be provided for. I do not know if President Obasanjo was especially corrupt; in fact, he was one of the founding members of TI. However, his vice president, Atiku Abubakar, suffered from a reputation of corruption. Many Nigerian governors led very lavish lifestyles. Patronage was widespread. To survive and rule in a place like Nigeria, within a very corrupt system, leaders had to manage their environment.

I found Nigerians personally likeable. By African standards, many are articulate, sharp, witty, and sophisticated. I enjoyed most of the people with whom I worked and my contacts in the business and the banking community.

On the other hand, Nigeria possesses a well-deserved reputation for conniving and criminal enterprise. If some of the Nigeria's more criminal mentality could be channeled into productive areas, the country would be one of Africa's shining lights. Given the squalor and the dog-eat-dog behavior, the bitter social divisions, the flagrant corruption, I do not see how this could happen. It really is a sad commentary on the country.

Q: If you are sitting in Lagos or Abuja and you have a billion dollars in Swiss bank accounts, what does this mean for you? Does this do anything?

COHEN: I cannot answer that question. When it comes to corruption, I cannot rationalize behavior. Nigeria's corruption should be viewed as systematic, not individual. Decades of dictatorship - when I say dictatorship I acknowledge the country's military rule has been both relatively benign and viciously malignanhave poisoned any sense of civic service that may have existed. Nigeria's last military ruler, Sani Abacha, was the most malignant. He accelerated Nigeria's economic and social freefall. But I assume Abacha suckled at the nipples of his predecessors in order to reach his unique super corrupt reputation. I have no idea why the theft of $100 million is insufficient to a man like Abacha. Why do these individuals feel they must move out one or even two more digits in their scale of corruption? The cost, of course, to Nigeria's vast population is just enormous. Think of the billions in oil revenue which has disappeared, has been squandered. Look at Nigeria's natural resources, the capability of its people, and one might hope things could be turned around.

I visited the University of Ibadan. Ibadan, Nigeria's third largest city is about two hours north of Lagos. Founded in 1948, the University of Ibadan was one of Africa's premier universities, if not the best at one time. When I visited the campus, the place was a shambles. Dictators, particularly megalomaniacs like Abacha, do not take kindly to free-thinking universities. He persecuted students and professors alike. The building infrastructure was almost completely collapsed. Students did not possess textbooks, classrooms did not have windows, and the dormitories did not have beds. In my view, just installing windows, placing beds in the dorms, providing textbooks to the students were insufficient measures. In Nigeria, the broken infrastructure and the scarcity of textbooks were symptoms of the greater problem. What was required was a mental turnaround. The fatalistic thinking of the administrators, faculty and students depressed me. They had been beaten down. They had sunk this low, there was no way to reverse the rot.

Q: Was conservative Islam taking over in places?

COHEN: Yes. Nigeria's north is predominantly Muslim. In northern states such as Katsina and Zamfara, the political leadership perceived leverage and advantage in advocating Sharia Law, the most traditional Sunni interpretation of the Koran. Under Sharia code, religious precepts for judicial process and punishment would be applied instead of civil law process. Islamic courts and judges arbitrated cases instead of civil courts and civil judges. In a Sharia system, accused adulterers, particularly women, could be punished by death. Women were more at risk than men since the burden of proof on females was usually impossible to overcome. Rape became adultery. Accusations against rapists were easy to challenge. Whether innocent or not, the accused, if female, had no chance. Theft might dictate amputation of the hand, a very Wahabi-Saudi type of justice. Southern Nigerians were appalled, not simply because most were Christian. Sharia law is severe, rigorous, and oppressive and generally lacks humanitarian considerations. A juridical crisis was emerging in Nigeria between political figures in the north seeking the imposition of Sharia Law and Nigeria's mainstream. Most within the federal government, I suspect, preferred to keep a lid on Sharia. They feared the genies that might emerge from the bottle. Islamic fundamentalism was a new phenomenon in the region. However, the GON failed to develop any coherent strategy to limit or reverse the spread of the Sharia movement.

In the south, Sharia could never make serious inroads. Muslims were a minority in the south. Even religious Muslims recognized that Sharia was a northern issue. But the issue divided even more deeply a nation suffering from profound rifts. Throughout Nigeria's central heartland such as Plateau state, Christian and Muslim populations were closely balanced. In these areas Sunni Muslims lived tensely and nervously with animists and Christians. Religious and ethnic strife was easily sparked. When the lid came off, usually over some insignificant incident, hundreds might be slaughtered. It was pretty gruesome.

Q: What about Nigeria's military? Were they dominated by any particular group?

COHEN: I cannot tell you much about the military. In Lagos I did not associate with them. I never dealt with the Ministry of Defense.

But I can remark on the role played by the military in the region. President Obasanjo sought to expand Nigeria's regional leadership. While governed by military dictators, Nigeria did not exercise much African leadership. But with Nigeria's democratically-elected government, Africans welcomed greater Nigerian leadership. Under ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), President Obasanjo sent a contingent of Nigerian troops to Sierra Leone as peacekeepers. This was pretty remarkable. A couple of years earlier, Nigeria would never have been invited to provide peacekeepers. Now Nigeria was taking a lead role. Unfortunately, many Nigerian soldiers sent to Sierra Leone contracted HIV. The incidence of HIV within the Nigerian military rose rapidly because of these deployments.

As long as I am on the topic of HIV, Nigerians pretty much deny that the country has an HIV problem. It's true that percentage wise, the incidence of HIV was much lower than in high incidence countries such as South Africa or Botswana. However, Nigeria's population is many times greater. Incidence may be lower but the sheer quantity of people was high. HIV-AIDS was becoming a major problem.

Q: Was HIV having an impact on the society?

COHEN: Not yet. I do not know what has happened since I departed Nigeria in 2002. Compared to HIV incidence rates in East or South Africa where HIV has devastated entire classes of the population, Nigeria had not reached that stage - yet. In Nigeria death can be so endemic that even an HIV epidemic may not be immediately noticed. Except for the military, HIV did not yet seem to affect those narrow population segments as elsewhere.

Q: One of the most important foreign relations overseas is between a consulate and an embassy. How did things work between the two?

COHEN: Generally with difficulty, occasionally with crisis, and every once in a while with camaraderie. The relationship was stressed for a multitude of reasons. Start with a large embassy in the country's largest city, Lagos. A small liaison office is located in the new capital, Abuja. Because of the sour bilateral relations during the Abacha years, the liaison office was intentionally kept small and insignificant. The USG did not want to offer any legitimacy to that dictatorship by having an embassy in the capital. So we kept a very small office in Abuja. Obasanjo becomes Nigeria's elected president. Our bilateral ties warm up. President Clinton decides to relocate the embassy to show our support for the new government. Many embassies have already made the move to the capital. It is the right decision.

However, the embassy infrastructure was in Lagos: the experienced FSN staff, the office space, the warehouse, etc. It could not be relocated quickly. To shoehorn so much into the small premises of the liaison office in a short timeframe was impossible. The new embassy required office space, enhanced security, and support mechanisms such as a functioning general services office, a budget and fiscal section, and a credible motor pool. The existing infrastructure was inadequate. The Lagos consulate still had to provide a these services which are usually managed out of an embassy.

In Abuja, the staff developed a jaded attitude towards the consulate. "They keep the best furniture for themselves." "They have nice offices down there while we are squeezed into tiny offices." That sort of thing. I sensed that many in Abuja developed a real chip on their shoulder towards the consulate. It was unjustified, if not ridiculous. Despite the hardships in Abuja, living conditions there were better than Lagos. Resources were pouring into Abuja. Again, I attributed much of the bitterness to Cohen's first law: embassies and consulates reflect the cultures in which they are located. Northerners thumbed their noses at southerners, and visa versa. The stress lines remained deep between the embassy and the consulate. Ambassador Howard Jeter did nothing to resolve things. In fact, he made them much worse.

I found the relationship particularly difficult since my position, by all rights, should have been in Abuja. The public diplomacy counselor also sat in Lagos as did the senior consular officer and the senior management officer. The core of the political section was in Abuja. The head of USAID transferred to Abuja in early 2001. The legal attachï¿½ and the Foreign Commercial Service office remained in Lagos. While some senior staff worked in Lagos, others, including the Ambassador, resided in Abuja. There were two economic officers assigned to Abuja. How was I to manage them when they are ten feet away from the DCM? I supervised my staff in Lagos, but dealing with Abuja was another matter. Given the accessibility to embassy leadership, Abuja staff could easily bad mouth the consulate. That is what happened. As I noted, this was worsened by the mediocre ambassador, Howard Jeter, and the insensitive DCM, Tim Andrews.

In earlier years Nigeria had a string of good ambassadors. During the mid 1990s, Ambassador Walter Carrington took on Abacha. He made it very clear that the USG opposed Abacha's horrible human rights behavior. This got him into hot water with the Nigerian Government which created friction. However, Carrington was well loved by the Nigerians. Then, there was Ambassador William Twaddell. I arrived after his tenure, but he was also a popular ambassador. During his tenure, morale in the mission, reportedly, was high. When he arrived in country, Ambassador Jeter moved directly to the embassy in Abuja. He immediately seemed to fall into an Abuja mentality which did not do the consulate in Lagos any good.

Jeter aggravated tensions between Lagos and Abuja by his decision to retain the principal officer's residence in Lagos as his own. The residence in Lagos was a beautiful property, probably the most valuable piece of residential property in Lagos. It was acres large right on the lagoon, a perfect place for receptions and social events. When the embassy moved to Abuja, the ambassador was expected to take up residence there. Sure enough, when Jeter arrived in country, he moved into the Abuja Nikon Hilton, the most respectable hotel in the city. (That's not saying much.) Throughout Jeter's tenure, he occupied a suite of rooms at the Nikon at great cost to the U.S. taxpayer. An entire wing of one floor was sealed off. Properties occupied by senior staff would have been perfectly adequate on a temporary basis for an ambassador. Yet, Jeter never moved into a permanent Abuja residence. No property was good enough, he said. Since the hotel was considered temporary quarters, he justified keeping the ambassadorial residence in Lagos. Because Jeter rarely appeared in Lagos, perhaps once every four months for a couple of days, the residence was vacant perhaps 95 percent of the time.

Under Ambassadors Twaddell and Carrington, Embassy staff had long enjoyed access to the property, particularly the volleyball court and swimming pool. The community had been welcome. Consul General Nancy Serpa, the former DCM, lived in a perfectly acceptable but smaller residence. Her successor, Robyn Hinson-Jones, should have moved into the former ambassadorial residence. But Jeter kept the property off limitand vacant. This caused deep resentment, especially among the FSNs. It's not like Lagos had alternative green grass, volleyball and tennis courts, and swimming pools. Many perceived making the property off limits to both American and FSN communities as a terribly vindictive act. The Lagos community had always been treated as one big family. Now an imperial ambassador refused to share the property which was not even being utilized. He worsened the deep divide between the embassy and the consulate.

In early 2002 a State Department inspection team came to Nigeria. It reviewed the situation. The team recommended (ordered) the ambassador to relinquish the property. He eventually did. However, Jeter delayed his formal handover of the property to the consul general by a few months. The bitterness although lessened, persisted. Too bad an ambassador let his ego get the better of him to the detriment of the mission.

Q: I was wondering whether you could say something about internet fraud.

COHEN: When I began my job, sitting on my desk were cases from people who had been suckered by internet or "advanced fee fraud." In Nigeria, this type of crime is known as 4-1-9. Nigerian crime syndicates were talented perpetrators of this type of fraud.

Q: I have not gotten one of those emails in a couple of years now.

COHEN: Most of the fraud occurred in the mid to late 1990s before people wised up to the various schemes. Some correspondence went through the mail. In fact, so much went through the mail that the criminal gangs made counterfeit Nigerian stamps to cut costs. Then, the internet became popular. Criminals went online. Targeted persons (pigeons?) who followed the instructions on a variety of get rich schemes handed over important personal financial information. When I arrived in Lagos, folks who lost tens of thousands of dollars were seeking recourse. A few still refused to believe they had been suckered. It was a hopeless challenge. Still, some believed the embassy could assist. People actually thought that they could get their money back. They submitted documentation to us. "I do not understand," they might say. "I was told this was full proof!" Yeah, full proof for the criminal. A stranger offers you 30 percent of $30 million for assistance in getting money out of Nigeria. What fool would hand over bank account information to such an individual? Fortunately for me, by this time most 4-1-9 cases were being forwarded to our Legal Attachï¿½, the resident FBI agent, or our Secret Service agent. Both Secret Service and FBI had active offices in Lagos.

Q: Did you get any feel about the Washington view of Nigeria?

COHEN: At the end of the Clinton Administration in 2000, relations between Nigeria and the United States were cordial. The principled position taken by Ambassador Carrington during the 1990s against Sani Abacha endeared him to the Nigerian masses. During the Abacha regime, sanctions applied against Nigeria included an embarrassing condemnation of airport security at Murtala Mohammad Airport in Lagos. From 1992 until 2000, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) posted signs at airports throughout the U.S. advising travelers that Murtala Mohammad Airport in Lagos did not meet minimum ICAO standards. When travelers transited U.S. airports, signs were everywhere cautioning about travel to Murtala Mohammed Airport in Lagos, Nigeria. I wonder what most Americans going through St. Louis or Denver thought about the warning. Direct flights between the two countries were suspended in 1993. It was true that Lagos airport was exceedingly dangerous from an aviation and security perspective.

After Nigeria's 1999 elections, the United States demonstrated, in a very palpable way, support for the Nigerian people. And so President Clinton, the embodiment of U.S. opposition to Abacha, enjoyed widespread popularity. In the summer of 2000, he traveled to Nigeria. In Abuja, the road between the airport and the main highway was renamed "Bill Clinton Way." Okay, getting a street named after you is one thing. However, to have the main road from the airport renamed? U.S. assistance to Nigeria rose to over $100 million. In May 2000, Clinton signed into law the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which offered incentives for African countries to expand trade with the U.S. It was clear that Clinton was well regarded. At the end of his administration, bilateral relations were very good

Initially, the Bush Administration did not focus much on Nigerior on Africa for that matter. Africa was viewed as less important geopolitically. Nigeria's oil was important, of course. But other aspects of the relationship were not perceived as critical. While foreign assistance levels remained high, the political relationship lacked magnetism. I cannot say it deteriorated. But it was not flourishing. Then, after 9/11, U.S. attention faltered even more.

On November 7, 2000, I attended the Public Diplomacy Section-hosted election night in Lagos. Every embassy and consulate should host such an event during the U.S. presidential elections. By the way, when an event is held in Lagos and runs late, you cannot just hop in your car and go home. Security dictates something more, an up-armored vehicle or escort. Remember Lagos is about five hours ahead of the U.S. east coast. During the evening a straw poll was taken among the Nigerians for the two candidates, Gore and Bush. The event was large, a couple of hundred invited guests. Bush received, maybe, five or six votes. That says much as to the Nigerian frame of mind. They were very pro Clinton and wanted Vice President Gore to win.

In the U.S. Congress, a number of congressmen had formed a Nigeria support group, or caucus. I believe it was headed by Congressman William Jefferson from New Orleans - no relation, of course, to William Jefferson Clinton. He visited Nigeria fairly often. Later, Jefferson got caught up in a scandal.

Q: I do not know where the case stands but he has been accused of having lots of unreported business.

COHEN: Steering business to Nigeria, etc.

Another congressman I met there was John Lewis from Georgia. I was very impressed with him.

Q: Was there an African American-Nigerian connection?

COHEN: Certainly, it was not as noteworthy as elsewhere in Africa. Ghana had a pretty strong connection. We visited Ghana in late 2000 and toured the former slave forts along Cape Coast. I saw nothing like that in Nigeria. I believe there is a stronger ethnic link between Nigerian groups, particularly the Yoruba, and Brazil. Many Afro-Brazilians are descended from the Yoruba. Some actually still speak a Yoruba dialect in Brazil.

Perhaps Nigeria's rigid dictatorships were a factor. Except for oil workers, Americans did not travel to Nigeria. I mentioned the FAA alert regarding Lagos airport. In 2000 links were just being reestablished. No direct air routes existed between the United States and Nigeria. Travelers from the U.S. transited Europe on Air France, KLM, British Airway, or Lufthansa. The USG encouraged U.S. carriers to consider the establishment of non-stop flights to Nigeria. Nigeria's own national carrier, Nigerian Airways, was the biggest joke around. To say it had fallen on hard times was an understatement. Perhaps one airworthy plane was left in their fleet. Nigerian Airlines' workforce, meanwhile, contained something like 5,000 employees.

Q: Was there concern about an AID program? Here is a country that is earning billions of dollars and yet we have an AID program.

COHEN: True. The U.S. does not have USAID foreign aid programs in many oil exporting nations, particularly members of OPEC! But if you look at Nigeria's low per capita income, its devastating poverty, Nigeria clearly qualifies as a low income country deserving of assistance.

Q: You said a quarter of the population of Africa is in Nigeria. You look at the map of Nigeria and it does not seem that big.

COHEN: Nigeria is densely populated. There are more people in Nigeria than there are in all the other countries of West Africa combined. Teeming cities containing millions of people are scattered throughout Nigeria. Just like China, many Nigerian cities not well known have populations in the millions - Ibadan, Onitsha, Port Harcourt, Kano, Kaduna, Enugu, Benin City, in addition to Lagos. Nigeria is very urbanized by African standards.

Let me say a few words about Nigeria's neighbors. Next door to Nigeria's west is Benin. Benin's official capital is Porto Novo, but Cotonou is the real capital. Benin is a sliver, a little finger of a country. It is part of francophone Africa, the former French West Africa. Nigeria was a former English colony. Despite the ethnic similarities, Benin possessed an entirely different culture. We viewed Benin as a vacation destination.

Ironically, the people posted in the embassy in Cotonou viewed their assignment as a hardship. In fact, USG officials stationed in Cotonou received extra money for extending a third year in a hardship post. The program was called Special Needs Differential (SND). The SND program money was not available to us in Nigeria. Yet, we viewed Benin as kind of a vacation spot. None of the embassy folks in Cotonou, I am certain, would have freely switched assignments with us!

The same applied to Togo, one country over from Benin. We ate at restaurants in Lome, Togo's capital. We stayed in a nice hotel. What a shock! The country seemed civilized, despite being dominated for more than three decades but one-man rule. Beyond Togo is Ghana. Compared to Lagos, Accra was Disneyland.

Marla and I traveled to South Africa. I won't even try to compare that country with Nigeria. In Johannesburg, we waited to board the SAA flight back to Lagos. We confronted a mob scene at the gate. What was going on here? Apparently, Nigerians were such professional crooks that some actually were attempting to board the aircraft using counterfeit airline tickets. A passenger would get on the plane and find someone sitting in his seat. South Africans could not stop talking about Nigerians. Many attributed South Africa's crime wave to the influx of Nigerians into the country.

Q: I had a prep school classmate who became president of a bank in Baltimore. He said that as soon as anybody could identify a Nigerian at a teller window, everybody would shut their windows. They treated this very cautiously because every trick known might be used against the bank.

COHEN: An official from the Federal Aviation Administration in Washington visited Nigeria frequently. Kevin knew Africa and he knew Nigeria well enough never to use credit cards in country. Always carry enough cash to pay for your hotel, etc. Kevin needed a last minute change in plane tickets. He was at the Sheraton Hotel near the airport. (Do not mistake it for any Sheraton in America!) He had to purchase a new ticket on Lufthansa and did not have enough cash. The only way Kevin could buy this ticket was to use his credit card. He figured it was the Sheraton Hotel and he was flying immediately into Frankfurt. When he got to Frankfurt, he planned to contact the credit card company in order to assure there would be no unexpected expenses. Kevin arrived in Frankfurt and called up the credit card company. Sure enough, in the few hours Kevin had been in the air, it had already been hit for a few thousand dollars.

The criminals were smarter than any of us could ever be. You have to admire them. It takes quite a bit to con the system. And Nigerians are the ultimate risk takers. The worldwide reputation of Nigerian criminals is well deserved.

Q: 9/11. The attack on the World Trade Center. How did that hit you?

COHEN: We were five or six hours ahead. It was already mid-afternoon when we got the news. We watched events on CNN at the consulate. I spoke earlier about being in India during the Gulf War. Many Indian citizens were stuck in the Persian Gulf. There was a lot of personal engagement. But in Nigeria there was little we could do, directly or indirectly, as a result of 9/11. We were not on the frontlines, so we felt a bit isolated and helpless. The post soon received a string of requests from Washington to look at issues that we never really looked at before. One of the areas would be terrorist financing, money channeled through Nigerian banks. Nigeria was a logical money-laundering location because of the weakness of the banking system and lack of controls.

The U.S. prepared to take on the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. I received an unusual request. About a month after 9/11, I was asked if I could provide information about caves in Afghanistan. They knew that I was a caver. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, cavers had avoided Afghanistan. The caving literature from thirty years earlier was sparse. I did make one suggestion. To find caves in a barren landscape is relatively easy with high tech gear. Fly on dark, cold nights and use infrared sensors. Warm spots in the middle of the mountains may mean caves. Caves retain heat in the winter and they remain cool in the summer. A cave of a certain size will keep a constant temperature throughout the year; the average temperature of that area. If it is below freezing on a dark night, you should be able to pick up those warm spots. During the heat of summer, the reverse is true. You can pick out cool spots that might be caves. That was my contribution to the war on terror.

Q: Alright. You left there is 2002?

COHEN: Let me just finish up with Nigeria. As far as doing economic work, Nigeria was quite rewarding. I felt I made a difference. For living conditions, Lagos was awful, in some ways even worse than my subsequent experiences in Afghanistan. My wife will never set food in Nigeria again. I do not blame her. The week that I left, my Nigerian contacts threw farewell parties for me that were just unbelievable. I had been there less than two years and developed wonderful professional relationships. So although I could not wait to get out of the country, I left with a heavy heart from all these relationships.

Q: I would like to ask you, as you left there and particularly coming from the economic perspective, whither Nigeria?

COHEN: Just before my departure, I wrote a cable to Washington, addressing that very topic, whither Nigeria. There are certain things all officers should consider before departing post. One is good briefing material for your successor. Officers should also consider doing wrap up cables for Washington about their experiences, observations, etc, without censorship by the front office or embassy. I do not remember the details of what I said. I tried to portray some positive things about Nigeria but cautioned that we should be careful in how we use eye wash when we look at this country.

Q: Did you feel that the embassy was trying to make Nigeria look better than you saw it?

COHEN: That was part of Ambassador Jeter's problem. And, in my view, it is not uncommon among chiefs of mission. I will talk about this a bit when we get to Brazil. Perhaps some ambassadors feel they must make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Unfortunately, sometimes it works against USG interests to put a positive gloss or spin on something where honesty and realism are required. If there is corruption, do not try to hide it. If there is malfeasance in the electoral system, don't gloss over it or belittle it. Nigeria has had serious problems for a long time. There is no need to gloss over these things. The Clinton Administration, even with a positive bilateral relationship, was under few illusions about Nigeria. During my tenure it was difficult to fathom exactly where the Bush Administration came down since it expended little energy on Nigeria on a bilateral basis. My reporting was read. People in the Department appreciated it. We stuck to a reporting plan. I achieved what I set out to do. But I still possess a jaundiced attitude about our embassy. We labored in Lagos under difficult conditions yet received almost no recognition. Before I left, I nominated a number of outstanding young officers for awards, only one of whom worked with me in my section. Two officers worked in the consular section. As a section chief, I could nominate officers working in other sections. If I had not done that, I doubt these officers would have been recognized for their hard work as vice consuls in Lagos.

Q: It is 2002. I will let you take over.

COHEN: The assignment to Brasilia was not one we had anticipated. In the fall 2001 Marla and I agreed that we would extend for one more year in Lagos. It was a hard decision, especially for Marla. She did not like her work environment. Lagos itself was tough. But we really appreciated AIS where David was in elementary school. While stationed in Lagos we also received the maximum education allowance for sending out eldest to boarding school in the United States. Abby attended Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, an excellent school. That was an incentive to stay. At the time the Department was considering extending special needs differential (SND) funding to Nigeria. Under SND, if you agree to extend an extra year at a selected hardship post, you would receive an additional fifteen percent in pay.

We weighed the upsides and downsides to staying in Nigeria. The ledger came slightly to the plus side, so we thought that this would be the best for us. Ambassador Jeter heartily approved my extension for an additional year.

In late 2001, we went on R&R to the states. We returned from R&R and found a surprise. Ambassador Jeter had been back in Washington. While there, he sought a replacement for me. Jeter really was an African hand and, I suspect, he felt comfortable surrounded by his people. I was certainly not an Africa hand, nor a part of the Africa Bureau mafia. I had not served in Liberia or previously worked West African issues. Moreover, since I was resident in Lagos, the usual back-stabbing gossip may have been at play in Abuja. I suspected much of the section's good work was being overlooked or belittled. DCM Tim Andrews' management of the mission was just short of a fiasco. He possessed jaded views about the Lagos staff. And my successor could be easily moved to Abuja.

I discovered the Ambassador's perfidy. I inquired first to Consul General Hinson-Jones. She was perplexed as well. I contacted the front office. The DCM confirmed the story. He threw me a bone, however. "Why don't you stay and continue to work in the section?" In essence, I would be working for my replacement. I should have told him to shove it. I simply said, enunciating my words clearly through the typically poor connection, that my departure from Nigeria was "etched in stone." We were leaving at the end of my tour, just a few months away.

At that point, it was January. The summer cycle jobs, particularly the good ones, were pretty much gone. Almost no jobs were available. I discovered how difficult it was to crack into other parts of the Africa bureau. Earlier, I had the impression that the Africa bureau treated its officers with deference and respect. Certainly, AF enjoyed a reputation for taking care of its own. But my experience with AF at the time was indeed sobering. The bureau left me high and dry. By most measures, I had performed an outstanding job in a difficult environment. Economic reporting was going smoothly. Relations with local contacts could not have been better. But the strains between Lagos and Abuja seemed to be worsening. The front office in Abuja cared little for its people in Lagos. After that, I never wanted to go back to AF and have nothing good to say about the bureau.

I was considering two possible postings. One was in Sarajevo. It was a good job. The other position in Brasilia was not as good. Either Brasilia or Sarajevo. The Sarajevo position offered the advantage of being in-cone, hardship money, and a European posting. There was a distinct downside, however. Children between the ages of five and seventeen were not allowed at post due to land mines. Perhaps the land mine issue was an exaggeration. All of our children then were within that age range. For her own job Marla was seeking positive feedback but was not really getting any.

Brasilia was situated in a civilized country. The job there specifically was political-military affairs. I was not really excited about it. But Marla was getting positive vibes from Brasilia about a job. And we heard from the embassy Community Liaison Officer (CLO) that the American School in Brasilia was quite adequate. One night I had this revelation in my mind. I worried about Sarajevo; for the sake of the family, it was best to decide on Brasilia. Marla was angry with me for deciding in this manner, but she preferred Brasilia. We took the Brasilia assignment.

The assignment required some language training. I had Spanish earlier. We finagled thirteen weeks of Portuguese, not the full program. We went into Portuguese language training and reached Brasilia at the end of October 2002.

Q: You were in Brasilia from when to when?

COHEN: We reached Brasilia in late October 2002, just a couple of days after the election of President Lula. I departed post in June 2005. Marla stayed on until August 2006.

Q: Can you talk about Brazilian-American relations when you got there?

COHEN: It was certainly an interesting time. First, the Oct. 2002 election of Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the Partido de los Trabajadores (PT) or labor candidate, as Brazil's president. Many viewed Lula's election as a sea change in Brazil's political paradigm, certainly a rejection of the moderate-conservatism of incumbent Fernando Henrique Cardoso of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party. Lula's pending presidency unnerved Washington. Did it portend a leftward shift in Brazilian foreign affairs and domestic policy? Would Lula exhibit a strong populist stance with regards to trade issues, etc.? In the run up to the election, when it became more apparent that Lula would be the likely winner, Brazil's currency, the real, kept declining. By the time we arrived, the real fell to approximately four to one dollar. That was an extremely low rate of exchange. The purchasing power of US dollars was unusually strong. For us Brazil was a bargain, we stocked up at Brazilian stores. It was a good time to be holding dollars.

On the exterior, President Lula reflected his labor-PT heritage. To his credit, he brought in some moderate - perhaps pragmatic is a better word - people into his administration. Others were straight out of the PT philosophical camp and sounded little different from the leadership of Brazil's radical 1960s student movement. Of course, some of Lula's closest aides came from that leftist movement; some had been student leaders when Lula began his rise in the Sao Paulo labor movement. Lula's smarter advisors realized the difference between reality and rhetoric. As it turned out, some of the economic policies under Lula tended to be pragmatic.

Lula was inaugurated president on January 1, 2003, New Year's Day; Brazilian presidents are always inaugurated on New Year's Day. The inauguration presented challenges to the United States Government. Washington could not decide which senior official would represent the USG at the inauguration. Usually, for a Brazilian presidential inauguration, Latin governments sent the foreign minister. Often, presidents attended. Brazil, the second largest democracy in the Western Hemisphere, is an extremely important country for the United States. One would think a high level U.S. delegation would attend the inauguration.

Yet, in the week prior to the inauguration, no delegation head was identified. The disarray in Washington as to who to send was becoming an embarrassment. Secretary of State Colin Powell evidently was reluctant to attend. Perhaps the fact that the inauguration was on New Years Day dissuaded senior cabinet level officials from attending. Also, there may have been a lack of enthusiasm for Lula specifically. In any case, at the last minute the U.S. Government sent U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) Robert Zoellick to represent President Bush. Despite the embassy's assurances that Zoellick's position was a cabinet level one, no one in Brazil bought it.

That the United States selected the USTR to represent it instead of a "senior" official pissed off the Brazilians. They felt snubbed. On a particularly sensitive occasion, Brazilians of all walks of life recognized that the low level U.S. delegation was proof the USG had not favored a Lula victory. Lula himself apparently felt that he was being treated cavalierly. He described Zoellick as the "sub of a sub." At least half a dozen heads of state from Latin America attended the inauguration. Fidel Castro was treated to rock star status. The presidents of Bolivia, Peru, and Argentina attended. Numerous foreign ministers, some from Europe, came. Yet the United States was represented by the Trade Representative. "Is that all that the U.S. thinks of us?" We are just a "trading partner?"

Q: When you said the name, it did not ring any bells.

COHEN: A few years later, Robert Zoellick served as Deputy Secretary of State. Today he is head of the World Bank. But he was not at State then. I believe Zoellick's attendance instead of the Vice President, Secretary Powell, or another prestigious cabinet level official demonstrated, at the least, benign insensitivity. Brazilians interpreted it as a signal how we viewed our bilateral relationship - that trade is the most important aspect of our bilateral relationship.

Q: Was there a debate over who would travel to Brazil on New Year's Day? Were there forces in our government which were reluctant to grant any accord or open a hand to the new president?

COHEN: I do not know. I was not privy to deliberations in Washington. I suspect it was a combination of factors, including New Year's Day. But remember what was happening in late 2002. This was the lead up to the war in Iraq. The USG pressed hard for support at the United Nations Security Council. Brazil was about to take a rotational seat at the Security Council. It stood to reason that the USG would do everything possible to placate the new Brazilian government. I suppose the attitude in Washington towards Brazil was tinted without focus to its importance. Everything outside the Middle East was being cubby-holed. Latin America, it seemed, had fallen off Washington's radar screen. In the war on terror Brazil was not perceived as a "team" player. Brazil had not demonstrated support for the pending attack on Iraq. In fact, the GOB expressed displeasure with the direction of U.S. policy. From my perspective, the U.S.-Brazil relationship was sour because we permitted it to become sour.

Q: Let us talk about this relationship. Who was the ambassador?

COHEN: The ambassador was Donna Hrinak, a high flyer who had been ambassador in La Paz, Caracas and Santo Domingo. She was extremely sharp, spoke Portuguese quite well, and appealed to Brazilian audiences. But she had some noteworthy ambassadorial flaws which hurt the embassy terribly.

The relationship between the United States and Brazil has always contained some stress. Towards the U.S., Brazilians often display some deep-seated inferiority complex. I thought Mexicans possessed such a psychological scar. But after serving in Brazil, I felt that Mexicans display less of an inferiority complex vis-ï¿½-vis the United States compared to Brazilians. Brazil views itself as almost our equal. It is a vast country of 170 million, immense compared to any of its neighbors. Brazil contains more population than the rest of South America combined. Brazilians felt the United States did not provide the respect that Brazil deserved. Looking at this from the Brazilian perspective, they were probably right.

From the beginning of the Bush administration in January 2001 until weeks before our November 2004 presidential election, Secretary of State Colin Powell had not visited Brazil. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld first visited Brazil in March 2005, after he had been in office over four years. He transited Brazil on a meaningless trip through the region. To my knowledge the only cabinet level officials who traveled to Brazil during the first term of the Bush Administration were Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill - a fiasco of a triand, I believe, the energy secretary.

Within four years of a presidential term, one would expect the president or vice president might have visited, perhaps during a swing through South America. Certainly, the secretary of state might come through a few times. Would not the defense secretary visit the hemisphere's second military power? How about the secretary of commerce or agriculture? The USG demonstrated through neglect an attitude towards Brazil that fed that country's inherent skepticism. I do note that during the second Bush term, many more high level visits were conducted. Since late 2005 President Bush has been to Brazil twice.

Q: Was there a message that we were trying to send? Were we miffed at the Brazilians or was it particularly a matter of disregard?

COHEN: It was probably the latter more than the former. Perhaps some in the U.S. Government were miffed about Brazil, for whatever reason, petty or not. But until October 2002 when Lula was elected, the Cardoso government was quite popular in Washington. There was no evidence the Bush administration did not like Cardoso. It just seems that while Brazil was always out there, the USG leadership did not seek to demonstrate our close relationship with Brazil.

I pose another example of benign neglect. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration had bi-national commissions with a number of countries, including Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, and China. High level, cabinet meetings were held in each other's countries, chaired perhaps by the vice president, like the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. Even if there were not many practical outcomes to these extravaganzas, they played well in our partner country. Mexicans pointed to the high level attention. All those cabinet secretaries flying to Mexico for a day! The Russians seemed to take the commission meetings seriously. I know that these commissions demanded the attention of busy senior officials. But the return on investment of time seemed high. Brazil may not have required a full commission, but regular high level meetings would have helped reduce the many bilateral irritations that kept cropping up.

Q: I think all of us in the Foreign Service have heard that the Brazilians are supposed to have probably the most effective Foreign Service. I have heard this many times. And yet when I think about it, I cannot think of anything that Brazil has done in these thousand interviews I have conducted. Except for people who served in Brazil, the country does not come across my radar.

COHEN: Perhaps I can explain. Near the end of my assignment in 2005, I drafted a three-part mega-cable on Itamaraty, the nickname for Brazil's Ministry of External Relations (MRE.) Itamaraty comes from the name of the building which houses the MRE's head offices and reception rooms. It was designed by Oscar Ribeiro de Almeida Niemeyer, the architect who drew up most of Brasilia's government structures. I was familiar with how MRE operated. I dealt with it on a daily basis. My think piece examined Itamaraty in great detail. The following were some of my observations:

Brazilian diplomats are selected in a very competitive process, not dissimilar to the U.S. Foreign Service Officer selection system. However, the Brazilian Foreign Service does not reflect the broad breadth of Brazil's culture and ethnic make-up. The selection system is severely tilted towards Brazil's elite. It is akin, perhaps, to the State Department process of the mid twentieth century. What the U.S. Foreign Service looked like two generations ago.

Q: Many are the sons of diplomats.

COHEN: Very many. The candidates tend to come from the same schools. One does not see Brazil's poorer classes represented. Afro-Brazilians are invisible. The mosaic of Brazilian society is not reflected in Itamaraty.

Officer candidates who enter the Foreign Ministry, Itamaraty, are all highly educated, talented, and highly motivated. The Foreign Ministry puts all its new officers through an intensive curriculum, one or two years, at their Rio Branco Institute in Brasilia. Rio Branco is Brazil's counterpart, albeit smaller, to the State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI). Brazilian Foreign Service Officers are not so much trained as indoctrinated. Many enter Rio Branco with advanced degrees. Why teach political science to incoming Foreign Service officers who perhaps have advanced degrees in this subject? Training should fit the needs of the individual officer. Look at the U.S. Foreign Service. Most new Foreign Service officers and specialists have extensive academic background from many universities. They may require specific training to become management or consular officers. They receive technical and language training to meet the requirements of the job. Yet new Brazilian Foreign Service Officers receive at Rio Branco the equivalent of another college degree in political science. All must be proficient in certain languages and receive language training to reach that proficiency. The requirement for English was exceedingly high. One official at Itamaraty described the level of English required by candidates was equivalent to an English degree from Cambridge University. The candidates must also master Spanish and, until a few years ago, French.

In a country of 170 million people, many capable people have some linguistic capability in English and Spanish. French is more of a stretch. But the fluency in English that was expected by Rio Branco weeded out most Brazilians who spoke English but not polished English. Brazilian elites who lived abroad as children, often of diplomats, sons and daughters who attended the best schools, they achieved linguistic mastery.

Ironically, in 2004 MRE announced that to level the playing field for all Foreign Service applicants, it was dropping the English language requirement. This brought much derision from many directions, including Brazil's media. Some pundits asserted the dropping of the English requirement was a knee-jerk anti-American jab. (Of course, some pointed to the fact that the name of the language is English, not North American!) The truth is that English is a necessary skill anywhere and especially for diplomats. What was needed was not a canceling of the prerequisite but a lowering of the ridiculously high linguistic standard required by candidates to a level more akin to a Foreign Service Institute 3/3.

Selected candidates are put through a rigorous program at Rio Branco which inculcates a "Brazilian" way of looking at things. The doctrine is reflexively anti-U.S., perhaps a residual of MRE's old guard leadership, many of whom came of age in the 1960s and still possessed a jaundiced view of U.S. foreign policy. These old men ran MRE with an iron fist. Much of their rhetoric we would consider "leftist." The Rio Branco curriculum then taught to the incoming Foreign Service officers reflects their own attitudes and biases. It's a Foreign Service that has some of the sharpest guys on the planet. Unfortunately, MRE attempts to "brainwash" them. The younger Brazilian Foreign Service Officers I knew seemed to me too savvy to fall for the leftwing rhetoric. But all knew that to get ahead they had to kowtow to the party line laid out by the Itamaraty high command.

Q: Again and again, I interview people and ask what embassies played a role? Sometimes it is the Scandinavians; a lot of times it is the French or the British; sometimes the Germans; obviously the Russians. But never do I hear the word "Brazil." The only time I have heard about a Brazilian diplomat was the one who headed the UN mission in Iraq and was killed in August 2003. He is the only Brazilian who has ever raised any profile.

COHEN: Sergio Vieira de Mello was the Special Representative of the Secretary General in Iraq. But here is the irony. He was hardly a Brazilian. He studied at the Sorbonne. He joined the UN in 1969 and had been a United Nations official until his death. I believe he resided in Switzerland. De Mello spent his entire career with the United Nations. He was a United Nations bureaucrat, not a Brazilian diplomat. However, in death, Sergio de Mello's legacy was basically usurped by the Brazilians. He became this super Brazilian diplomat. It was a message of nationalism and protest against the Iraq War which "cost us the life of our dearly beloved Sergio." That, I think, is still typical of Brazil. That the one well known Brazilian diplomat who rose above the mediocrity did not rise through their system; he rose through the United Nations system.

Q: You said that our Ambassador possessed certain skills and had some famous flaws. What were they?

COHEN: Ambassador Donna Hrinak possessed some noteworthy skills. She performed well with Brazilian audiences. Brazilians liked her schmaltz, they admired her vida. Ambassador Hrinak understood the Brazilians in that regard. She had served in Sao Paulo; her son was born in Brazil. She understood Brazilian culture.

When Ambassador Hrinak took over, she presented Washington with a list of possible things that could be done to improve U.S.-Brazilian relations. Some items on the list were completely illogical. But I guess it's an ambassador's prerogative to advocate the impossible or illogical. To anyone who observed what was happening in Washington at the time, some of her proposed initiatives were clearly dead ends. For example, she proposed reintroducing the Peace Corps into Brazil. The last Peace Corps volunteers left Brazil in 1980. Ambassador Hrinak understood Brazilians but perhaps she did not understand Brazil. She pushed hard for Peace Corps, yet she failed to see the obvious. The GOB did not want to have the Peace Corps back. A Peace Corps presence is a sign that a country is under-developed, that it needs help. Brazil does not view itself as needing help. Having Peace Corps volunteers would indicate Brazil remains an underdeveloped country. Hrinak never seemed to understand some of those very basic things.

Her worst flaw, however, was management of the mission. Ambassador Hrinak thought she knew how to run a mission. But her technique was divisive. She played officers off against each other. She divided the embassy between her confidants and the rest. I suspect she trusted most those officers who were Brazil hands, just like Ambassador Jeter wanted his West Africans colleagues for Nigeria. Unfortunately, she trusted and favored some to the exclusion of other competent officers. This divided the embassy dramatically. As ambassador, she had a clearly defined role that could not be replicated within the mission. However, she also wanted to be her own political counselor as well. This suppressed differing opinions. It was difficult to express other views to her, as it would be for many chiefs of mission. "Madam Ambassador, I do not think that would be the right choice." There was no way to vent differing opinion without her taking it as criticism. The DCM, Dick Virden, was compliant and took no issue with her, even to defend the mission from her whims or when she made questionable decisions that affected performance and morale. To me, that was an abrogation of responsibility. A deputy chief of mission must serve as an intermediary, be the bearer of counter-arguments, and soften any hard edges presented to the staff by the boss. He failed on all counts. Ambassador Hrinak could be extremely abrasive and abusive to her staff. And there were instances of possible waste, fraud, and mismanagement that never emerged into the light of day.

Q: Can you think of any that, at least generic ones that were a problem?

COHEN: One that comes to mind pertained to her son. At the time, he was about 17 years old. I never met him so my perspective is second hand. He attended high school in the U.S. where his father resided. The ambassador succeeded, with the collusion of Dr. Scotty from Office of Overseas Schools, in getting him designated as a special needs child. I do not know if it was ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) or another learning disability. That was not important. By having her son designated as special needs, he was entitled to receive the full education allowance for boarding school in the United States, perhaps $35,000. Others within the embassy community who knew better that I, asserted the boy was no more worthy of the learning disability designation than most teenage boys. Moreover, the boy's father was resident in Florida. Under normal State Department rules, with a custodial parent in the U.S. he would have to attend local public school and receive whatever special needs pertained within the school district.

Meanwhile, the American School of Brasilia (EAB) was grossly substandard. We and other families had been misled into thinking the school met basic education standards. EAB was mediocre, particularly at the higher grades. In essence, it was a Brazilian school with a crust of U.S. curriculum and standards. Our son in sixth grade was doing work he had performed two or three years earlier in elementary school. However, the education allowance for sending a child elsewhere for schooling was perhaps $14,000 or $16,000, the EAB tuition. In order to continue our daughter at boarding school in the U.S. meant we were out of pocket for over half the away school expenses. We had no choice. Because their children were in the majority at EAB, Brazilian families ran the school. It was in their interest to keep tuition low. So EAB was choked for money. The program suffered accordingly.

The ambassador exploited her relationship with a particular State Dept. official to obtain, essentially, a free ride for her son at boarding school in the U.S. At the same time, she was adamant that the school in Brasilia met proper education standards and was adequate. This meant we were stuck with the low education allowance and it prevented staff from shifting their children out of Brasilia.

What was her purpose to having EAB not fall below the "adequate" label? If EAB were determined to be below education standard, attracting Foreign Service personnel with children to Brasilia would become even more difficult. As a Foreign Service post, Brasilia is chronically underbid. If word was spread that, at this supposedly family-friendly post, the school was inferior, what families with adolescent kids would bid on Brasilia? Ambassador Hrinak insisted that the truth about EAB be glossed over. One community liaison officer quit when forced by the front office to present the school in a more favorable light than the CLO, who had children in the school, was willing to do.

I will present a second example of the ambassador's impropriety. In the fall 2002, the new management counselor, Rafael Mirabal, arrived at post. He decided to hit the ground running. A day or so after his arrival, Raphael asked his office management specialist to set up an appointment with the house manager at the ambassador's residence. He felt it was important to meet with residence staff to learn the condition of the residence, any personnel issues, etc. Ambassador Hrinak blew a gasket. She shouted at Raphael and dressed him down for talking to her staff without going through her. Her behavior was grossly unprofessional. While staff members at the ambassador's residence are employees of the ambassador, they are paid by the U.S. Government, not the ambassador. The management counselor is within his right to speak with them, check on housing conditions, and correct any problems. A good relationship between residence staff and the embassy management office is imperative for proper operations. Reportedly, there had been operational issues at the residence prior to Raphael's arrival. If the ambassador was unhappy that she had not been asked personally by Raphael to meet the residence manager, she should have spoken with him in private.

This incident poisoned the ambassador's relationship with her management counselor from day one. There was no reason for the ambassador to have been vocally abusive in front of others. Raphael was forced to depart post before completing his tour.

Why was Ambassador Hrinak so peeved? Perhaps it was because she herself was involved in an unusual deal with her housekeeper. Although not first hand, the information was common knowledge within the embassy. When she came to post, the ambassador shipped an automobile. Since the vehicle was imported by a diplomat, no Brazilian taxes were required to be paid. Of course, ambassadors never drive a personal automobile in country. Ambassadors enjoy use of embassy vehicles driven by trained drivers. The purpose of bringing this car to Brazil apparently was to pass it along to the housekeeper and avoid payment by the purchaser of Brazilian taxes.

Reportedly, the ambassador paid her residence manager three times the going rate for that position. That would be a tidy salary, paid for by Uncle Sam. None of the embassy's management counselors - including the interim management counselor - nor the embassy's human resources officers would approve the salary contract. Instead, she signed it herself. During a subsequent Inspector General (IG) inspection, this contractual arrangement was identified as a deficiency that required immediate correction. The ambassador assured the IG that the matter would be fixed, but it never was.

As I mentioned, the embassy suffered from mediocre morale, a situation I attribute, in part, to Ambassador Hrinak. This was unfortunate. The living conditions in Brasilia were, by far, the best I ever experienced in any of my overseas assignments. Yet, Brasilia was my worst assignment. As far as U.S.-Brazilian relations, it was like watching a train wreck every day.

Q: You mentioned Secretary of Treasury O'Neill's trip.

COHEN: I believe O'Neill was the first cabinet secretary to visit Brazil after Lula's election. The trip turned into a fiasco. Although the Secretary had earlier approved billions of dollars in IMF lending to bail out Brazil, he later made comments concerning money in the country being siphoned off to Swiss banks. The Brazilian press had a field day. But it showed how little serious attention the Bush Administration gave to Brazil. While Washington focused on the finance and trade relationships, little was done to boost the political relationship until well into Bush's second term.

Q: Was there the equivalent to a "Friends of Brazil" within Congress or anything?

COHEN: A "Friends of Brazil" group existed but I know little about it.

Brazil did attract its share of congressional delegations (CODELs). CODELs generally transited Brazil over weekends. Somehow, because of scheduling, all of them had to spend a weekend in Rio de Janeiro. Funny how that happens! Perhaps, one semi-substantive meeting is scheduled. Then, two days off at the Copacabana. Foz de Iquacu was usually on the travel itinerary. Sometimes, they passed through Brasilia. While some of the CODELs were not serious, some were.

Q: Let us talk about your job. You were the political-military officer.

COHEN: I was the deputy political counselor in charge of political-military issues.

Q: What were we interested in?

COHEN: The United States and Brazil enjoy a long history of military cooperation dating back to the Second World War. Because of German U-boat attacks on Brazilian ships, Brazil declared war on Germany and Italy in August 1942. President Franklin Roosevelt described Brazil as "the springboard to victory." The United States utilized air bases in Brazil's northeast around Natal to send planes to Africa. Brazil's northeast corner is relatively close to the curve of Africa. During the war the second largest U.S. naval base in the world was located at Recife. The navy used the base to patrol against German submarines.

Later in the war in 1944, Brazil sent the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (BEF) to Italy. They fought in the northern Italian campaign alongside a mosaic of troops from many nations. Hundreds of Brazilians lost their lives in battle. Brazil takes great pride that it was our ally in World War II. It was the only serious military action that Brazil has seen since the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, Americans and American history books seem to have forgotten or just ignored Brazil's wartime role. I venture to say that most Americans could not even confirm that Brazil fought with us in World War II. This was an important facet of Brazilian history and we ignore it. The Brazilians find this difficult to comprehend. "We were allies; we fought side by side with you against Nazism; we have a shared history."

Q: Unlike Argentina or Chile which were in bed with Hitler.

COHEN: Even some American historians probably would get it wrong. There are still some World War II veterans in Brazil. They are regarded as heroes. Most major cities and even many small ones have museums commemorating the BEF. Brazilians are proud of the former relationship with the U.S. military, the exchanges, and the officers who attended U.S. military schools, who studied jungle warfare at Fort Sherman in Panama. The Brazilians are proud of their own Jungle Training School near Manaus. Our military relationship was strong and deep. Yet, from 2003 onwards, we basically stiff-armed them. The principal culprit was the American Servicemen's Protection Act (ASPA), specifically, the act's instruction that agreements be negotiated under Article 98 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). I do not know if anybody ever raised this. Have you ever heard of this?

Q: It sounds like a SOFA.

COHEN: It is not unlike a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). The American Servicemen's Protection Act, introduced by Senator Jesse Helms and passed in 2002, states that its purpose is to protect and shield American military personnel and other U.S. officials from prosecution by the ICC. Early in 2001 the Bush administration discontinued U.S. involvement in the ICC and nullified the Clinton administration's signature of the instrument creating the ICC, the Rome Statute. When the ICC was created, negotiators of the Rome Statute noted that previously existing agreements, such as SOFAs, dealt with protection of military personnel and some countries might want these agreements to take precedent. When a crime had been committed, the agreements might oblige the country to return the accused to their home country for prosecution. Article 98 of the Rome Statute was designed to take these discrepancies into account. Essentially, it allowed countries to opt out, through bilateral agreements, from ICC jurisdiction.

The real purpose of the ASPA was to weaken the ICC. The act prohibited U.S. military aid to countries which are a party to the ICC. It exempted NATO and major non-NATO allies however. All others are required to sign Article 98 agreements with the U.S. They must agree not to send each others' citizens to the ICC without the permission of the other country, or undergo discontinuation of bilateral military assistance. Under the Clinton administration, this had not been an issue. But with the ideological Bush administration, the issue became paramount. Of course, the war in Iraq may have had something to do with this.

Let me provide a scenario. An American accused of a war crime such as genocide resides in Brazil. As a signatory member to the Rome Statute, Brazil could send the individual to the ICC in The Hague. But with an Article 98 agreement in place with the United States, the U.S. would have to provide express permission for the extradition. GOB permission would be required to send a Brazilian citizen resident in the United States but wanted for a war crime to the ICC.

Unfortunately, the ASPA goes beyond a SOFA. It stipulated any elected or appointed official, not just military personnel. In a country where the U.S. has a military presence, a SOFA protects our military personnel from being arbitrarily picked up and shipped off to The Hague. A Status of Forces Agreement makes sense in a country with U.S. bases. But where no U.S. bases are present, such as in Brazil, and there never will be, the imposition of such protections can be counter-productive. The administration effort to line up every non-NATO country in order to arm twist these countries into signing Article 98 Agreements was heavy-handed and fraught with diplomatic dynamite. Everyone knew it was an ideological campaign more than anything else.

In practical terms, no country, in my opinion, would arbitrarily ship American citizens to the ICC. Unless we are speaking about Iran or North Korea, in which case the ICC is irrelevant, the United States can retaliate in some other fashion in the case of arbitrary arrest and extradition of its personnel. But the ideology was clear. The U.S. refused to allow its citizens to be subject to the ICC.

Embassies around the world in 2003 and 2004 were ordered to press reluctant governments to sign Article 98 agreements with us. Some heavy hitter countries like Marshall Islands, Tonga, Tajikistan, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Maldives, Nauru, Bhutan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo signed on. For most of them, it mattered little. "Who gives a damn, we will sign on" like the coalition of the willing. Other countries, like Brazil, were more reluctant to knuckle under to the U.S. demands.

To those who chose not to go along with us, our message was "screw you!" We delivered the Article 98 pitch from Washington. Teams came to Brasilia. The Brazilians listened graciously. They nodded their heads and served us cafï¿½zinho. At the end of the day, they were not going to agree with us. To do so would have been terribly unpopular in Brazil. It went against Brazil's entire philosophical grain. Brazil strongly favors multilateral institutions like International Criminal Court. The U.S. sought to undercut the Court. They absolutely objected.

Our shortsightedness had a severe cost. Countries that did not agree to sign onto Article 98 would suffer ASPA-mandated penalties. Most countries which signed on did so, I suspect, because they did not want to suffer the loss of any military assistance. It was a toss away issue for most. Sign on the dotted line so military aid is not interrupted. What did Brazil get from us? Given the size of their GDP (Gross Domestic Product), it got peanuts.

So we cut off our military assistance to Brazil. The program was small, essentially just a couple of million dollars for subsidized training and exchanges. If Brazilian military officers wanted to attend a U.S. military school or academy, they now had to pay full retail price - a price that could run easily into six figures. I called it the "Saudi Arabia price." Our retaliation against Brazil had the predicted effect. They told us "screw you!"

The Brazilian military immediately decided to send its personnel to academies and schools in other countries. The Brits stepped in immediately. So too did the Chinese, the Russians, and the French. All of a sudden, Brazilian military officers who normally would have been educated at American institutions - who would have preferred to come to an American military academy - went off to Paris, to China, even to Vietnam! The number of Brazilians attending U.S. military schools declined very sharply.

Was this in our long-term interest? Of course not! It was idiotic. I cannot think of a more shortsighted method for burning bridges. Instead of breeding a favorable attitude toward the United States military, Brazil's next generation of military leadership was now to receive training under different (non-U.S.) military systems. And it had been the Brazilian military, not their diplomats or their civil servants, who had long viewed the United States favorably. We punished our supporters. Brazil's anti-U.S. Civil and Foreign Service chuckled about our own anti-American policy!

Q: I take it that this was way above your pay grade.

COHEN: Absolutely. I was just a witness to the fiasco.

Q: From your perspective how did we get along with the military at that time?

COHEN: On an individual basis, the military got along very well. On a number of occasions I escorted our Defense Attachï¿½ and Military Assistance Group officers on site visits. Brazilians held a higher regard for the American military than for any other military in the world. It was not so much because of our prowess. I believe it was because officer for officer, the Americans were more confident and open. Most U.S. military officers assigned to Brazil understood the country. They shared a camaraderie with the Brazilians that did not exist with the Russians or Chinese. The Brazilian military sincerely wanted a closer relationship. It was most sad to see how our administration behaved towards them. Because the other kid did not want to play the game by our rules, we took our marbles and went home. I am afraid Brazil's current crop of junior officers may be less amenable to us when they reach the senior ranks in 20 years.

Q: Was this fiction, did this come from within Congress, or was this from within the administration?

COHEN: The American Servicemen's Protection Act was passed by Congress and signed by the president. I doubt one in fifty congressmen today could tell you the ins and outs of that act. But think of the name: American Servicemen's Protection Act. As a congressman, how could you justify voting against it?

It was a Republican effort, no doubt, a reaction, pure and simple, against the International Criminal Court. The Clinton Administration had supported the ICC. The rhetoric of the Bush Administration against the ICC was caustic and vindictive. To Brazil's credit, it stood on principle. As I noted, it would have been impossible politically for them to have gone along with us. Many times we sent this message back to Washington, subtly but clearly.

Q: How did we view President Lula?

COHEN: At the beginning the Bush administration was very nervous. Washington feared that Lula could become a second Chavez. This was before Chavez became even more antithetical to us. Lula clearly is not the sharpest knife in the drawer but he is savvy. He surrounded himself with intelligent people. Plus, the Brazilian Civil Service and the Ministry of External Relations would not let him stray too far. So Lula did not take Brazil off its traditional path. As year one then year two of his administration passed, Washington's feelings about his performance became more positive. But it took almost three years from the time Lula was inaugurated before President Bush visited Brazil. Our major issue with Brazil was trade, specifically the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). Brazil, however, sought a relationship that went beyond this - not as a trading partner with the United States, but as a co-equal partner of the United States.

Q: Was there anything else, from your perspective, where we could work together with Brazil?

COHEN: We actually had some success working with Brazil. The U.S. assisted Brazil with creation of an aerial surveillance system over the Amazon called "SIVAM" (System for the Vigilance of the Amazon.) Using U.S. technology from Raytheon, SIVAM provides complex surveillance of the Amazon from locating aerial intruders, drug runners, to locating environmental degradation. Drugs flown out of Colombia and Peru flew unhindered over the Amazon. SIVAM now could track these airplanes.

A lot of strings were placed on high level U.S. technology due to proliferation concerns. In other areas of our political-military relationship, the difficulties in providing certain U.S. technology created problems. One area concerned jet fighters. Brazil sought to replace its antiquated, 30 plus year old squadron of Mirage fighter jets. Given the size of its economy and the size of the country, Brazil's air force was surprisingly obsolete and puny.

Ironically, Brazil's leading export to the United States is aircraft. Embraer 145 jets are ubiquitous for short haul flights throughout the U.S. Airplane components are the number one export of the United States to Brazil. Aviation is a very major industry. But Brazil does not manufacture high performance military aircraft which is what they wanted.

The Brazilian Air Force (FAB) flew antiquated Mirages. What fighter do they go with next? Brazilian manufacturers could assemble fighters. But did Brazil go with Mirage again, Russian MIGs, used Lockheed F-16s, or a Swedish aircraft? The competition was fierce. Then the Lula administration decided that it could not afford the $760 million plus required to outfit a new jet fighter squadron. The issue became a real mess.

Brazil does not need a squadron of high performance jet fighters. Fifteen or eighteen fighters in a country the size of Brazil was an almost meaningless deterrenbut great for air shows and national days. The FAB intended to station the fighters around the capital, Brasilia, for defense. Brasilia is in the center of the country. Who would ever attack Brazil, let alone Brasilia? From a strategic point of view, I could not fathom why Brazil needed new jet fighters, except perhaps because some of the neighbors had them. There was much pride at stake, even though the proposed squadron was going to consume a huge chunk of Brazil's military budget.

In the fighter competition, the United States offered up used F-16s being eased out of European air forces, in Holland and Belgium. With an upgrade of the avionics by Varig Aviation in Brazil, the jets could serve Brazil's needand at reasonable cost. That was the game plan. Brazil would get value added and technology. It was a pretty good deal. However, many senior Brazilians were convinced that the U.S. would not carry through on the tech transfer. The controversy with AAMRAM (air to air medium range missile) technology was fresh on their minds. In 2002 Peru became the first South American country to receive approval to purchase the missiles. But many in Brazil feared the U.S. would not allow the technology to be sent to Brazil, despite our assurances. The competing jet fighter consortia kept pressing the issue in order to dissuade the Brazilians from purchasing the F-16.

Dead end military technology had burned Brazil, and continued to do so. The Brazilian navy has had a nuclear submarine program since 1979. The SNAC-2 program was still being funded. If all went well from here on out, the first of three nuclear submarines might be commissioned in 2018. The program began during military rule when both Argentina and Brazil were in a nuclear weapons dual, of sorts. Since then, Brazil and Argentina signed on to the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT). Brazil's military had been out of power since the mid 1980s. Yet, this submarine program still went on. Brazil poured millions into the one nuclear submarine program. It made no sense. The country does not need a nuclear submarine. Brazil does not even need submarines, but a nuclear one was just absolutely ridiculous.

The Brazilian military had these white elephant projects from which they just could not wean themselves. This was a sad commentary about the Brazilian military. What are Brazil's strategic needs? I believe the answer is small scale. Brazil requires patrol boats capable of navigating the Amazon Basin and the coastal littoral. Not big expensive boats. Brazil needed a brown water navy and slower aircraft that can shoot down or intercept drug runners.

Q: That is a fairly simple, F-5 or something.

COHEN: Whatever. Most aircraft entering Brazilian airspace are prop planes. Instead of thinking in terms of the real threat to Brazil, the drug trade, the military seemed convulsed by late generation jet fighters and an extended blue water navy. What were the strategic risks to Brazil? I felt the Brazilian defense philosophy missed the point.

Q: What happened in the fighter competition? Did anything happen?

COHEN: My understanding is that the Lula administration did not budget the funds for the fighters. When I departed Brazil, the prospects for the fighters looked pretty bleak. These fighter jets cost a lot of money, funds the Ministry of Defense did not have. The Lula administration had a lot of demands on it for resources from various constituencies.

Q: Were there any reflections of Bolivia and Venezuela which were making rather radical turns to the left? Argentina which has been sort of a rival of Brazil?

COHEN: Brazil is South America's elephant. Important issues in Brazil were out of scale to even Argentina. Brazil, in my view, cannot change quickly. The election of a populist president like Lula was not going to turn Brazil 180 degrees. Brazil has too much depth, like a heavy ship it cannot turn swiftly. No, I did not sense that events elsewhere in South America had extraordinary influence on Brazil. I felt Brazil had a greater influence on its neighbors than vice versa. Frankly, Brazil and its South American neighbors really did not understand each other well. To be on the same continent and share borders with all but two countries yet not fully comprehend your neighbors surprised me. Perhaps it was the difference between Hispanic and Brazilian-Portuguese cultures.

Brazilians tended to be inward looking. Like the United States it is a continental country. Brazilians perceived themselves as special. Nowhere was this more evident than in football. To Brazilians football-soccer was not just their game; it was their psyche. Victory against the world was almost an entitlement. That Brazil would play in the World Cup Final was taken as automatic. And defeat was not just a downer, it was a national disaster, especially if the national team lost to an inferior opponent. For most countries, just getting to the finals is considered to be an accomplishment - except, perhaps, for the major European powers like Germany. For most, defeat would be hard to take, but life goes on. Brazilians perceived themselves as special in football. They took extreme pride in many things, like football, yet they frequently behaved like children.

Permit me a couple of examples. Sometime in late 2003, the U.S. imposed fingerprinting on incoming visitors to the U.S. It was a consular requirement: all visitors to the United States would be digitally fingerprinted upon entry to the U.S. This program was in response to terrorism fears. Perhaps others have explained this. Brazil took our action personally. The U.S. was targeting not the world, but Brazilians! The press played it as an "anti-Brazilian" act on our part. What happened? A judge in Mato Grosso or some other remote state ordered that Brazilian immigration officials take reciprocal action with American visitors landing in Brazil. On January 1, 2004, a new security process was set up.

American citizens arrive at Sao Paulo's Guarulhos Airporusually after an all night flight. A long line of travelers wait to pass through immigration. Brazilians and diplomats waltz right through. A separate entry line, separate from other third country nationals, was created just for U.S. citizens carrying ordinary passports. It was the longest, slowest line. All the U.S. passport holders were fingerprinted and photographed holding up a sign with their name on it. Reportedly, the process lasted on occasion up to nine hours. After the Americans departed the immigration area, the fingerprinted cards were probably tossed. The process was created simply to be a nuisance on U.S. passport holders and to send a message to the U.S. Government. Did the USG care? Of course not!

Two weeks after the new procedure was created, an American Airlines pilot was fingerprinted and held up the sign, showing his middle finger in the process. He was arrested for making an obscene gesture to airport officials. The Brazilian press had a field day. The pilot was released after American Airlines paid a fine of almost $13,000. Soon after, miraculously, the Brazilians installed electronic digital fingerprinting equipment and the long line dissipated.

My second example concerns a journalist, Larry Rohter, who was Rio Bureau Chief for The New York Times. In May 2004, Rohter wrote an article, printed on an inside page of a weekday edition of the newspaper, which referred to concerns among some Brazilians about President Lula's predilection for drink. It was true, of course. The Brazilian President often had a beer or a caiparinha in his hand. The article suggested that perhaps Lula was sending the wrong message to Brazilians about alcohol. But it was an article on the inside of The New York Times that is read one day, forgotten the next, and turns into fish wrap the day after.

The nothing story in The New York Times became a huge issue in Brazil. Lula was upset and ordered Rohter's visa to be pulled and he be expelled. The Ministry of Justice justified the banning, saying the article lied and was "offensive to the honor of the president." Rohter was married to a Brazilian, had Brazilian children, and had lived in Brazil for years. Then, to complicate the stupidity, the GOB sent an official protest to the United States Governmenas if The New York Times was an organ of the Government!

Initially, the Brazilian media jumped up to defend Brazilian honor. The labor unions and various leftist groups joined the bandwagon. The U.S. was criticized and the NYT article cited as another example of our patronizing attitude towards Brazil. After reflection, however, the mainstream Brazilian press realized its error. If the GOB is permitted to expel a foreign journalist for such an article, what might this mean for freedom of the press in Brazil? If a newspaper publishes an article critical of the president, could the government pull its newsprint? Former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso described the government's behavior as an "overreaction." That was an understatement. I told my Brazilian colleagues that they did not get it. The incident, just like that of the American Airlines pilot, make Brazil into the biggest joke on the planet, worthy of a monologue by David Letterman or Jay Leno, America's leading late night satirists. Eventually, cooler heads prevailed and Rohter was not expelled.

I point out these incidents to reflect on Brazilian propensity to blow things out of proportion when it came to the United States.

Q: How did the Iraqi War play while you were there?

COHEN: Poorly. I frequently marched into the Ministry of External Relations (MRE) with demarches from Washington requesting Brazilian support for the United States at the UN Security Council. At the time Brazil held a rotating chair on the UNSC. Following the script, I emphasized the war was not about oil. Marla and I thought the war was a terrible blunder. Even if everything the administration said about Saddam Hussein was completely true, which we did not believe for an instant, we perceived no overwhelming threat to U.S. national security. Certainly, any rational or well read thinker, or anyone minimally familiar with that part of the world, could comprehend the ludicrous idea of a Saddam Hussein-Osama bin Laden connection. Sadly, I missed the point though about oil which my Brazilian counterparts claimed was the true rationale for invasion.

I knew the talking points I delivered were bullshit. But more importantly, my counterpart across the MRE desk knew it was bullshit. There was no way that we were going to convince the Brazilian Government to support the war. The demarche was hardly worth the paper upon which it was printed. But I always got a nice cafï¿½zinho during my visits to the ministry. And we had nice conversations.

Brazil's philosophy towards the war was completely at odds with the Bush administration. Irrespective of the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) question, the GOB did not perceive a compelling reason for taking down Saddam Hussein. It was a firm believer in the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. There was no love lost with Iraq. But Brazilians of all stripes were viscerally against U.S. policy.

I can contribute a few interesting stories about Iraq. Soon after we arrived in Brasilia, in December 2002, Marla and I attended a diplomatic reception, the UAE National Day. It was held in the large ballroom at the Blue Tree Hotel, probably Brasilia's best. The Emirates put on a really nice spread. This was our first diplomatic reception in Brazil. I walked up to two men - the first two people I met. I tried to start up a conversation. I introduced myself. One gentleman responded that he is the Iraqi ambassador. The other man was the Libyan ambassador. Perhaps I was not wearing my hearing aids. The background noise was deafening. I understood the Iraqi, but I could not understand the Libyan; I thought he said Bolivian! So I began to speak Spanish! That was pretty dumb. Imagine being at your first diplomatic reception in country, going up to the first two guys you meet, and they are the Libyan and Iraqi ambassadors. This was three months before the invasion.

Months later, I discovered the Iraqi was not really the ambassador. He was, apparently, the embassy civil administration officer. But he called himself the ambassador. The Ministry of External Relations could not even say what he was. Later, I was asked by the ministry to try to figure out the fellow's actual title!

After the war and following the provisional authority administration, an Iraqi government was formed. I urged MRE to allow the re-establishment of an Iraqi diplomatic presence. Before hostilities, the Iraqi mission located on a prominent Brasilia highway, was essentially abandoned! Weeds grew from the embassy property. Graffiti was spray painted on the embassy walls. Cars in the embassy parking lot were not moved. The building, a real eye-sore, stayed like that for two years.

I encouraged the MRE to support an Iraqi mission. Apparently, Brazil never broke diplomatic relations so Iraq was welcome to reopen the embassy. I recommended to Washington and Baghdad that the newly established Government of Iraq reopen its embassy in Brasilia. With Brasilia as a base, the Iraqis could reestablish a presence in South America. At the same time, the Government of Brazil was eager to expand relationships throughout the Middle East and Africa.

In May 2005, the GOB planned to host a major summit between South American and Middle East countries, the South American-Arab World Meeting. I pressed MRE to make sure that the Iraqis were invited. They were. The Brazilians welcomed reopening the Iraqi embassthey too wanted to alleviate the embarrassment of a vacated mission on a main arterial highway. At diplomatic receptions, I occasionally ran into the Iraqi "pseudo-ambassador." He was a lot friendlier to me than he had been the first time we met at the UAE reception. I guess he was not too closely affiliated to the Saddam Hussein regime. About a week before the May 2005 summit, the GOI sent a small team to reopen the embassy. I was probably the first diplomat to visit it. Except for the Spartan furniture, the place was vacant. Bare spots on the wall indicated where Saddam's picture once hung.

Q: By the time you left were you beleaguered with the news coming out of Iraq?

COHEN: I did not feel beleaguered. We knew early on that the real war was in Afghanistan. I was curious about what was occurring there. In early 2003 a cable from Washington asked for volunteers to man provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan. The first PRTs were just then being established. I had been in Brazil six months and was disheartened by my job and unenamored with the embassy. Despite a good family atmosphere, from a work perspective I was unhappy. I contacted the Afghan desk and inquired about the request for volunteers. After some dickering, I agreed to serve on a three-month stint. No one within the embassy could stand in my way for a temporary assignment to Afghanistan.

In late 2003 I served in Afghanistan. I will talk about that later. I never personally supported our Iraq policy. But I was very willing to serve in Afghanistan.

Q: Based on your time in Brazil, was there a general feeling of support for our involvement in Iraq?

COHEN: I have yet to meet a Foreign Service Officer who felt that we made the right choices and implemented the right course of action in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. There must be some out there. None of the Foreign Service Officers with whom I discussed Iraq, even those who favored taking down Saddam's regime, had "drank the kool-aid." Most Foreign Service personnel recognized that the real battle was taking place against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and not in Iraq.

Brazilians, when I returned from Afghanistan, were very interested in hearing about my experiences. I received much vocal encouragement from Brazilians who supported us with Afghanistan.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about regarding Brazil?

COHEN: Most of my views about Brazil have been raised. I again refer to Cohen's First and Second Laws that I mentioned earlier. Embassies and consulates reflect the cultures in which they are located. Certainly in Brazil this was absolutely the case. And to be successful, embassies require chief of missions and deputies who possess different personality characteristics. The failure of leadership was not just the ambassador; it was also the DCM. In Brazil's case, this was an excellent example of both laws.

Ambassador Hrinak was replaced by a political appointee, John Danilovich. He was a businessman, closely tied to the Bush Administration. He was an ambassador right out of central casting; he looked the part more than anyone under whom I served, with the possible exception of Ambassador John Negroponte. Danilovich had a warm, open personality; he did not put people off, nor did he lose his temper. He did not castigate subordinates or dress them down. From that perspective, he was a dramatic improvement over his predecessor. Ambassador Danilovich was not an earth shaking envoy. He made some errors and perhaps focused on things that were distractionlike his residence. But at least he was pleasant about things

Q: Cohen's first law is that embassies and consulates reflect the culture where they are located?

COHEN: Yes.

Q: From some of my earlier interviews I go back to when our embassy was run out of Rio. One of the things that I have heard again and again was most of the male officers ended up with Brazilian mistresses because that is what Brazilian men had. The hours between three and five were mistress times. Was this going on at all?

COHEN: It certainly was not going on with me! I suspect that it was not as prevalent as perhaps during the earlier generation when the embassy was in Rio. Socially, Brasilia cannot hold a candle to Rio. I can imagine Rio in the 1950s, 60s and '70 and the almost idyllic lifestyle. To my knowledge, perhaps a few middle aged gentlemen in the mission fell into the routine you describe.

Brazil, the saying goes, is not a serious country. I am not sure whether I concur fully.

Q: Did de Gaulle say that?

COHEN: Maybe.

Q: I think de Gaulle said you really cannot take these people seriously; I may be wrong.

COHEN: Some aspects about Brazilian culture should not be taken too seriously. But the Brazilians desired nothing more than to be taken seriously. That was a passion, to be taken seriously.

Perhaps you recollect The Simpsons episode that stereotyped life and culture in Rio. The Simpsons is a cartoon family, one of the most popular shows in the U.S., shown weekly on U.S. television. It is satirical and slapstick. I understand this particular Simpsons episode spoofed Brazil with images of scantily-clad big bosomed women on the Copacabana, street crime, etc. In Brazil many people took the episode as a personal affront! They just did not get it. Of all people, Brazilians usually understand how to enjoy life. Perhaps too much! Yet, Brazilians seemed to take serious things that were unimportant or, when taking a step back, even humorous, for example, a message of passive and harmless resistance to authority, like giving the middle finger in the airport.

There were many things about Brazil that I appreciated. Brazil is a Catholic country with a strong strain of Evangelicalism. In many ways Brazilian attitudes were incredibly, refreshingly liberal. How can one be fun loving but lack a sense of humor or irony? This contradiction in the Brazilian psyche confused me.

Q: What happened Afghanistan-wise?

COHEN: Since I served twice in Afghanistan, I will break this up into two parts. In 2003 I arranged to go on a three month TDY to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Bamiyan.

Q: Would you explain what a PRT is?

COHEN: The U.S. military established a string of small bases in the major urban areas of Afghanistan. The initial PRTs were established in Gardez, Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Bamiyan. The PRTs copied the (arguably) successful CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program) model that the USG used in Viet Nam to win "hearts and minds." (Let's not focus on the end result in Viet Nam.) PRTs provide local security through patrolling, extend a foundation to deliver reconstruction, and support good governance and institution building. In essence, PRTs are platforms where military and civilians work together to expand development efforts and assist local government within a more secure environment. USAID officers served at the PRTs along with State representatives. In Afghanistan, PRTs were somewhat of an experiment. When they were established, it was not immediately clear how they were going to operate.

I heard about the Provincial Reconstruction Teams earlier in 2003. I exchanged messages with Washington about serving for a few months on one. Finally, we sealed the deal. I would serve in Bamiyan in the middle of the Hindu Kush in one of the country's poorest, most rural regions. Bamiyan was also a relatively benign part of the country, which pleased Marla who vetoed other PRT possibilities including Khost and Kandahar. I really wanted to go to Mazar-e Sharif, but that State position had already been taken. Tom Hudson actually went out there at the time.

I reached Afghanistan in September 2003. I reached Kabul on the same flight from Baku as a staff delegation from Capital Hill, majority staff director Charlie Flickner from the House Appropriations Committee. I stayed one week at the embassy, which at the time consisted of the old chancery building - in a pretty bad state of repaiand ubiquitous white trailers which bunked up to 12 men, or women, per. Some permanently assigned personnel had their own half trailers, but not the TDYers. For us, toilets and showers were about 150 feet away in a specially configured trailer. Behind the trailers, the new chancery was under construction. On the other side of the road in front of the compound, a field eventually became the second compound, called later "Cafï¿½ Compound." In 2003, embassy facilities occupied only one side of the main road. The embassy suffered from chronic overcrowding. Within the chancery, staff sat on top of each other. The political section consisted of one room with perhaps seven officers squeezed among the desks, cabinets, safes, and bookshelves. The USAID office, which channeled perhaps a billion dollars into the country, consisted of two small rooms and a series of desks disguised as cubicles. There was no room to stand.

After one week in the capital, the new USDA representative to the PRT, Manuel Ayala, and I flew on an UNHAS (United Nations Humanitarian Air Services) aircraft to Bamiyan. The U.S. Department of Agriculture assigned personnel to a few of the PRTs to develop agriculture-related projects. The UNHAS planes were twin engine Beechcraft with perhaps sixteen seats. To reach Bamiyan there were few options. The U.S. military flew helicopters and occasionally C-130s transports from Bagram airbase when required. But there was no regular service. The International Committee of the Red Cross also flew its own aircraft. Between the ICRC, UNHAS, and perhaps one or two other aircraft, that was the extent of air service into the Bamiyan valley.

Bamiyan is located at 7,800 feet elevation and is surrounded by high mountains. As the crow flies, it is perhaps 120 miles west-northwest from Kabul. But the crow better have oxygen. The mountains between Kabul and Bamiyan reached over 17,000 feet. By vehicle, the trip took most of a day. In the depths of winter, driving depended on snow conditions at the mountain passes. The famous Bamiyan Buddhas destroyed by the Taliban in 2001 looked out over Bamiyan village. It was a picturesque but impoverished valley, noteworthy primarily because it was the center of the Hazarajat, the heartland region of ethnic Hazara. Hazara are Shia, considered descendents from the Genghis Khan-led Mongol invaders of the 13th Century. Hazaras look somewhat Mongolian, and not at all like Afghanistan's other ethnic groups such as the Pashto. Being primarily Shia, they differ from the rest of Afghanistan's Sunni population.

On September 23, we landed at the rock strewn airstrip. The UNHAS flight disgorged its passengers midway down on the north side of the landing strip. The PRT compound was just on the other side, the south side. We had our luggage. No one from the PRT met us. It was impossible to walk with the gear. An NGO (non-governmental organization) vehicle graciously gave us a lift to the front gate of the PRT. We walked into our new home.

We reached Bamiyan, as I mentioned, on September 23, 2003, the day that the United States turned over command of the Bamiyan Provincial Reconstruction Team to New Zealand. The U.S. enlisted a number of countries to assist in Afghanistan. This was the true coalition of the willing. New Zealand, a nation of just four million, did not have to step up, but it did. The Kiwis committed to Bamiyan.

By the way, other countries took on PRT commitments as well. Germany established a PRT in Konduz; the United Kingdom took over Mazar-e Sharif. The Kiwis really lucked out with Bamiyan.

The PRT change of command ceremony took place that day. The U.S. flag was lowered; the New Zealand flag was raised. As part of the ceremony, New Zealand soldiers performed the kapa haka, a traditional Maori song and dance with much warlike symbolism. The New Zealand rugby team, the All Blacks, stage the kapa haka before taking the pitch against their opponents. Their effort at the kappa haka was a bit ragged. With practice, the Kiwi soldiers later became quite proficient.

The name for the New Zealand PRT was "Task Force Crib." Since this was the first Kiwi team in Bamiyan, it was called "Crib One." Each rotation of troops through the PRT added a number to Crib: Crib Two in December, Crib Three a few months after, etc.

Local dignitaries at the transfer of authority ceremony included the provincial governor, the Bamiyan mayor, and the provincial police chief. Afterwards, the Kiwis served lunch. The American officers and soldiers walked to the airstrip and embarked on helicopters for Bagram. Manuel and I were now guest residents of the New Zealanders. We had never even had a chance to meet the Americans before they departed. The previous State Department PRT representative, Keith Kidd, left a week or two before we arrived. At the time, USAID had not yet placed anyone in Bamiyan. We were assigned a hooch, a small barracks made of plywood.

Q: You use the term "hooch." I think it comes from Vietnam.

COHEN: Perhaps. The barracks certainly seemed like a Vietnam-era structure. The PRT was constructed by the Americans earlier in 2003. When it was constructed, the American military utilized inexpensive building materials, including plywood. Each hooch was raised of the ground up six or so stairs to the front door. Since the PRT was situated on a slight rise, fewer stairs led to the rear door. The Spartan hooches had no windows. Roofs were plywood with the roof trusses were left open - no insulation, simple drop bulb lighting, bare walls. In each hooch the Americans had installed a kerosene stove for warmth. However, the Kiwis immediately removed them since they were a fire hazard.

The barracks that Manuel and I entered already contained four American soldiers, all that was left of the U.S. team. They were holdovers of a civil affairs team (CA teams or CATs) responsible for continuing and completing the various civil projects begun by the U.S. military. The Bamiyan Civil Affairs Team consisted of a major, two sergeants, and a private. All were reservists. In fact, 96 percent of all U.S. army civil affairs personnel are from the reserve. Funding for the military civil affairs program came from a pot of money specifically for emergency relief. The program pushed money out the door for quick impact projects such as schools, wells, and retaining walls. Numerous projects were started in the province. This CAT team remained behind to see these projects through to completion.

There were six of us in the barracks: Manuel and myself, the major, and three enlisted men. We each occupied a section of the barracks. Parachute strung from the walls served as privacy curtains. We utilized primitive bookshelves for our clothes and personal items. My bed consisted of a board with a four inch foam pad that served as a mattress. The major used an army cot. Manuel and I arrived on a warm day, a late September Indian summer day. In Bamiyan, however, the weather turned cold very quickly. By the first week of October, the hooches were becoming a little frigid at night. Without the kerosene stoves, removed by the Kiwis, the hooches were unheated. A fire was the last thing anyone desired. But the Kiwis were not yet prepared for any alternative. Temperatures dropped to minus 20 or minus 30 Celsius by December. Then, living in unheated plywood hooches would have no appeal at all!

The Kiwis had ordered insulation material. By late October, the insulation material reached Bamiyan. We spent days installing the insulation material into the walls and ceilings of the hooches. After the insulation, plywood was hammered into the vertical beams and onto the roof trusses. We placed the insulation anywhere that we could.

The second step was to provide heat. The Kiwis decided to go electric. They hung overhead electric space heaters from the ceiling. The heaters looked like fluorescent light fixtures. They were certainly a great idea - if there had been sufficient electricity to run them. I will get to that later.

The PRT mess hall was a larger plywood structure located uphill from the hooches. The Kiwis served plenty of tasty, healthy food. At least, it was better food than found at American dining facilities (DIFACs.) On Fridays, the day off for the local cooking staff supporting the Kiwi cooks, a Kiwi squad assisted with cooking and kitchen duties. Fridays were always "grilling days," steaks, burgers, even lobsters.

The Kiwi military had a tradition whereby each of the various military contingents or services had their special day. There was infantry day, armored unit day, artillery day, engineer day. The U.S. Marines celebrate November 10 as the birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps. On those days, the honored unit did some sort of special set up. Perhaps, the birthday of the Kiwi engineers was in October. One day the engineers placed their cranes in front of the mess hall. On infantry day, the camp was awakened to the loud rat-tat-tat of a 50 caliber machine gun. I wondered what the locals were thinking that morning!

I am spending a lot of time providing a physical description of the PRT.

Q: Well, I think that it gives a feel.

COHEN: I describe something unique not found in other Foreign Service assignments. The Bamiyan PRT was located next to the airstrip - not that Bamiyan airstrip was a thriving airport. UNHAS (United Nations), ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and, of course, U.S. military aircraft utilized the airstrip. Occasionally, a large C-130 would land, maybe bringing some VIPs. Large Chinook helicopters from Bagram carried the big loads; Black Hawks conveyed personnel, VIPs, and mail. A few planes landed each day. When a plane landed, it was no secret. The PRT was only 100 yards off from the airstrip.

The compound itself was surrounded by HESCOlarge gray wire mesh square bags filled with rock and dirt. They formed a formidable bastion around the PRT perimeter, the outer wall for the compound. They were very thick, heavy, and blast-proof. Once filled, it was almost impossible to move one unless unfilled. Razor wire lined the crest of the HESCOs.

The front gate had a small guard house and guard tower. A 50 caliber machine gun looked out over the airstrip and the road which descended towards Bamiyan proper. If I said town, I am exaggerating. Bamiyan was a village. The airstrip and the PRT overlooked the central town. A dirt road wound down a hill, past a small plateau called Government Hill where Bamiyan's ministry and provincial buildings were situated. The town consisted of one principal dirt street with small shops that stretched for three or four blocks. Beyond that buildings razed by the Taliban had not yet been repaired. Behind the shops, a half a side street away, stretched potato fields. The main drag had recovered since the Taliban controlled Bamiyan. The Taliban devastated everything in the village including the commercial section and the Buddhas in 2001. Hundreds of locals were slaughtered by the Taliban.

Q: Was this because they were different?

COHEN: The Taliban possessed particular hatred for the Hazara because they were Shia. In the eyes of the Taliban, the Shia were apostates. The Taliban slaughtered Hazara by the hundreds. No Bamiyan family was unaffected. The Bamiyan valley had been, more or less, depopulated. Orchards were razed, livestock herds destroyed; there was nothing in the valley until after the Taliban were kicked out. Slowly, Hazara refugees started coming back. The bazaar, this one small street, served as the valley's commercial center.

Between the airstrip and the town itself was Government Hill, a small plateau and open area. At the center of Government Hill, in a field of perhaps four acres, stood a destroyed Russian tank, picked clean of all extraneous items. The tiny governor's office and police station were there. The qadi, or local judge, had his chambers next door. Various government ministries, the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, also served the community from this spot. I noticed early on a New Holland tractor that stood in front of the Ministry of Agriculture. Following a conversation at the ministry, I thought the tractor required repair. I convinced a visiting U.S. sergeant who was a mechanic to inspect it. The tractor was okay. I was misinformed or the victim of miscommunication. The tractor could not run because the person with the key was in Kabul. The African Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) worked out of a newer building on the hill. A primitive mud brick prisol use the term loosely since the place was nothing but a mud-walled compound with sealed roomheld a few prisoners. One, in particular, was a man accused of particularly heinous murders. His penetrating eyes and wild hair reminded me of Charles Manson. Bamiyan clearly needed a new jail.

Various NGOs placed their compounds in the area between the airstrip and Government Hill. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) had two compounds, offices and residences, as did the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Among the NGOs represented in Bamiyan were the Aga Khan Development Network, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Doctors without Borders (Mï¿½decins Sans Frontiï¿½res). The Provincial Reconstruction Team was located on the opposite side of the airstrip.

Viewing Bamiyan east to west, the valley was shaped like a "Y" with the main commercial area at the crux of the Y. To the west, two valleys followed rivers, streams really for most of the year. A maze of irrigation channels provided small farms access to the water. Without irrigation, farming was not feasible. The place was bone dry in the summer. The winter snow pack fed the streams, although snow during the early 2000's was certainly irregular. During Taliban times the Hindu Kush snow pack had been inadequate for good agriculture. Moreover, to punish the Hazara living in Bamiyan, the Taliban destroyed much of the irrigation system. After the Taliban fell in late 2001, heavier snowfall returned to the region. Popular opinion attributed it to the will of Allah.

Local inhabitants were very poor. Bamiyan is one of the more impoverished areas of Afghanistan which, of course, is one of the poorest countries in the world. As I explained, the Hazara had been persecuted by the Taliban. Many were massacred; families lost all their possessions, including property, to the Taliban.

Bamiyan had no institutions of higher learning, only a few primary schools with hardly any teachers or textbooks. One "university," a couple of small outbuildings really, had been targeted and destroyed during the U.S. air assault in 2001. Reportedly, the Taliban had used the buildings as a headquarters. With USAID funding, the U.S. was constructing new university structures for the campus, with anticipated completion in early 2004.

The potato served as the region's primarily agricultural crop; skimpy wheat cultivation complimented the dependence on potatoes. Bamiyan's famous orchards had been destroyed by the Taliban. We were told the Taliban killed or took away about 95 percent of Bamiyan's livestock.

Manuel and I arrived in Bamiyan at potato harvest time. In every field around Bamiyan town, families stacked mounds of potatoes. Children as young as two and three sat on the ground and sorted the potatoes by hand. They separated eating potatoes, the larger ones, from the seed potatoes that would be put aside for the next year's crop. For hours on end the children separated the potatoes. In the wheat fields, the threshing technology seemed no different than techniques used 3,000 years ago. To separate the chaff, the farmers tossed the wheat stalks in the air with simple implements. Rollers pulled by oxen crushed the wheat. I described the agriculture of Bamiyan as "biblical," straight out of the "Book of Ruth." Mechanized methods of farming were rare. There was no husbandry no agricultural extension had yet reached these people. The only mechanization I observed were the trucks that hauled the potatoes to markets in Kabul and elsewhere. The trucks were loaded beyond the brim with potatoes.

Bamiyan is a beautiful place. From the Provincial Reconstruction Team compound, one looked north over the valley towards the sandstone ridge where the Buddhas had been located. Where the Buddhas had been large cavities in the rock now existed. Hundreds of openings, caves chiseled by Buddhist monks and others in the 6th and 7th Centuries and earlier, pockmarked the panoramic cliff. An intricate network of cave passages had been carved out inside the mountain. Of course, the Buddhas were gone. A pile of rubble rested at the bottom of each of the 55 meter high cavities. The Taliban took the Buddhas but left the rubble.

Continuing to look north, the Hindu Kush stretched above this sandstone bluff. At different times of the day, the sunlight hit the mountains at various angles which made the vista starkly colorful and textural, especially when the snows began in early November. As November and December went by, the snow pack progressed down the mountains towards the valley. To the northeast of the PRT, about a kilometer away, the ruins of an ancient citadel, Shahr-e-Gholghola, covered a hill. Enraged by resistance in the valley to his conquest, Genghis Khan in 1221 destroyed the valley and killed every living thing in it. More recently, the Shahr-e-Gholghola ruins were utilized as defensive works by both the Russians and the Taliban. It was still peppered with landmines; shell casings and rusted ammunition boxes littered the place. A cleared trail marked by red painted rocks led to the top. The hill's devastation was quite complete. It was impossible to discern what destruction was modern and what dated back almost eight centuries.

Just east from the Provincial Reconstruction Team, the land fell into a ravine about twenty-five meters down. On a flat area in this small valley, the Afghans occasionally performed bushkashi. A very traditional sport in Afghanistan, Bushkashi consists of horsemen vying to pull a headless goat or sheep over a goal line. Do not ask me the rules. I suspect there are none. Behind the PRT to the south, the flat land rose gradually for half a kilometer until reaching a string of tall well rounded hills. The closest was called PT Hill, PT for "physical training." A serpentine trail looped up the hill. The Kiwis hiked or ran the trail. It was a challenge. The PRT is at elevation, over 8,000 feet. Some of the Kiwis make the hike before breakfast. If done briskly, you could do it in about an hour. Soviet-dug trenches along the top of the hill formed a defensive arc. The hill was pimpled with landmines so hikers had to stay on the trail.

Behind PT Hill the Hindu Kush rose quickly, up to 16,000, 17,000 feet. In that direction, the Hindu Kush's appearance, back-laced by the sun, differed dramatically from the northern vista. The southern mountains appeared more jagged than those to the north. The mountains did not seem to be part of the same range. West from the PRT, beyond the airstrip, was a patch of green, one of the upstream valleys of that "Y" I described. Miniscule little hamlets hidden by willow trees crept up the valley.

That is a physical description of Bamiyan.

Q: What about night? Being high up you could really see a star-filled sky.

COHEN: Bamiyan had no electricity grid, nor a square foot of pavement. Except for satellite phones, it did not have telephone communication. Bamiyan was as isolated a place as I have ever been. Because of the lack of light, the night sky was brilliant, especially during a new moon. During one full moon, I tried to read a book by moon light. While successful, given the eye strain I do not recommend doing it all the time.

During a new moon - and if the persnickety generators were not operating which at the PRT was quite oftethe compound was completely black. In the cave-like darkness you had to be very careful where you walked without a flashlight. Left over from the American presence, the generators were not Bagram's finest piece of donated equipment. As the compound expanded, demand for electricity surpassed the generator capacity. Under a new moon, a walk in the compound could be dangerous. You could trip and break a neck.

Dawn and dusk were most impressive. The dawn light coming over Hindu Kush was unforgettable. Morning sunlight first hit the mountains behind the Buddhas. I took one photograph in December of a full moon at dawn. A full moon in daylight is on the western edge of the horizon. To get such a picture especially with the Hindu Kush backdrop, was special.

In September, the weather was warm and sunny. But autumn came very quickly. By mid-November, temperatures fell below freezing. At night it was downright frigid. By early December the temps at night dropped to minus 20 Celsius. The PRT continued to suffer generator problems. Electricity had to be rationed. The principle consumers of electricity included the various hooches, the laundry, the latrines and showers. The mess hall and kitchen were a higher priority. The communications unit and command post received the highest priority. Thus, the hooches were last in line. When the temperatures dipped, electricity to run the heaters remained sporadic. Within the hooches, temperatures dropped at night to as low as minus seven Celsius, about 20 degrees Fahrenheit. I slept in my clothes with flannel sheets below my warm winter weight sleeping bag. Despite gloves, a scarf, and a hat, I still shivered all night.

There was a silver lining which people do not necessarily think about. When the weather is cold and you are active, your body burns lots of calories. Great for watching your weight! You shiver all the time. A person can lose weight even when eating a high carb diet. But there were no other benefits. On those few evenings when we did have electricity, the hooch temperature crept above the freezing mark. It was not a dramatic improvement, but enough to make, comparatively speaking a big difference in comfort.

When Manuel and I arrived at the PRT, our hooch had a television. The American PRT had AFRTS (Armed Forces Radio and Television Service) boxes attached to a satellite dish which brought in the signal. Our first week, we had television. Then, for some unfathomable reason at the beginning of October, the connection was broken. We never could figure out how to get the TV system functioning.

The Kiwis were not eager for AFRTS, but they were very desperate for TV. The reason was simple. In autumn 2003, Australia hosted the Rugby World Cup. No sport in New Zealand is more important than rugby. The Kiwis installed a satellite dish and rigged it for the Sky Network. All the World Cup games were shown. A large screen television was set up in the mess hall. Soldiers not on duty spent game day afternoons, evening in Australia, watching the games. The "All Blacks" did well that year until the semi-finals. They lost to their Australian rivals. That was a bitter pill. I learned quite a bit about rugby from the Kiwis.

The Kiwis were a wonderful group. Under Colonel Neville Reilly, the PRT was a happy base. I sensed less of a hang up about rank than among the U.S. military. Soldiers respected rank but were more casual about it than the Americans. New Zealand, I should point out, was part of the U.S.-led coalition, not a part of the NATO command. The Kiwi PRT followed U.S. rules, including Centcom's General Order No. 1 which prohibited alcohol at the PRT. Despite the "dry" environment, the Kiwis had a relaxed attitude. Everything was "sweet." Most everyone was on a first name basis. There was no saluting. They welcomed us on their patrols.

From the Americans, the PRT inherited beat up, high mileage Toyota High Lux pick-up trucks. Because of Bamiyan's road conditions, Toyota Hi-Luxes were probably the best used vehicle option. The UN and the NGOs drove newer Toyota Land Cruisers. Heavy vehicles were useless in most of Bamiyan province. The Kiwis also had a couple of Humvees; God knows how they ever got up to Bamiyan! Of course, Soviet tanks made it to Bamiyan so I should not be surprised. Many roads were not buttressed or wide enough to take heavy tract vehicles, with the exception of the Russian-built Kamaz trucks which could go anywhere.

If they had not been on their last legs, the Toyota Hi-Luxes would have been okay. The Americans procured these vehicles from a Pakistani shyster named Khan. The U.S. taxpayer paid top dollar for rental of the vehicles. They were abominable. Each had at least 100,000 tough miles on the odometer and broke down constantly. They were rattletraps. The Kiwis outfitted some with a 50 caliber machine gun on the rear bed. The gunner sat in a comfortable captain's chair and enjoyed a wide swivel for the 50 cal. In a convoy of four High Luxes a 50 caliber machine gun faced forward from the lead vehicle. At the convoy rear, the 50 cal. faced rearward. Usually, four Kiwis occupied each cab, windows open for security. If I went along, I sat in the back seat. Because of road conditions, travel was very slow. We crawled on mountain roads. The NGO Land Cruisers, always white and low mileage, flew by us.

The Kiwis divided Bamiyan Province into four patrol areas. Four infantry squads, each responsible for a different patrol area and led by a lieutenant, covered the province. The PRT consisted mostly of army personnel with a scattering of navy and the occasional air force officer. The medics were navy. There were no Kiwi civilians. The PRT commander, Colonel Riley, was a real gentleman. Every evening, the officers met after dinner at the tactical operations center (TOC) for a general meeting. Manuel and I participated. When a USAID representative arrived at the PRT, he attended as well. Everyone provided a report, the J-1, the J-2, operations, personnel, intelligence, etc.

Q: Did the PRT include Maoris?

COHEN: A few of the soldiers were Maoris. I cannot say whether they were pure blood. To do the kapa haka, there had to be Maori to teach the other soldiers.

In 2003, the PRT hosted a few VIPs. In late October, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark visited Bamiyan. To my knowledge, she was the first head of state to visit Afghanistan outside of Kabul. During her visit, the soldiers performed the kapa haka. For New Zealand, the PRT was an important, high profile military obligation. The presence of a military contingent in Afghanistan drew much attention back in Wellington.

At least half a dozen female soldiers served at the PRT. The women had separate showers, but the latrines were for everyone. Both showers and latrines were located on the downhill side of the PRT, the airstrip side. Fortunately, our hooch was close to the latrine side of the compound. On winter mornings - and I resided in Bamiyan only until mid-December, in January and February it was much coldel sprinted 30 meters from the barracks to the showers or the latrine. Water was a constant problem. The PRT did not yet have a well. Water was trucked by tanker from a nearby spring. Logistically, even though the PRT was a small base, maintaining and supplying it was quite a challenge. The Kiwis shipped food, ammunition, fuel, etc. from Kabul. New Zealand did not have the extensive logistical supply chain available to the Americans. The PRT mechanism depended on U.S military support from Bagram for air supply.

Q: How did the PRT deal with the language problem?

COHEN: The PRT housed about half a dozen interpreters, mostly young men. A few learned English while held in Taliban prisons. All were Hazara. Many Hazara not killed were imprisoned by the Taliban. The "terps" had their own hooch and their own VCR/DVD player. Every barracks seemed to have a VCR and DVD player, including ours.

Q: VCR is a videocassette recorder.

COHEN: Right.

Q: Which was a system for playing movies.

COHEN: The soldiers purchased movies, usually DVDs, in the local bazaar. The movies were knockoffs, pirated copies that had all sorts of flaws, available usually for a dollar each. In a place as rustic and rural as Bamiyan, there were not many options for entertainment.

I described the PRT environment. Let me elaborate a bit more on a description of the region. East from Bamiyan proper ran the Kabul road. At about 17 kilometers, the road split. The east fork ran through the Shebar Pass, at 9,800 feet (2987 M). That narrow, rutted dirt road reached the main Ring Road near Charikar, a few miles north of the military base at Bagram. The south fork, in no better condition than the Shebar road, cut through the Unai and Hakigak Passes that were even higher than Shebar. The road transited Wardak Province and hit the Ring Road southwest of Kabul. On a mountaintop at the fork itself, stood the ruins of the Red Fort, Shahr-e-Zohak. A redoubt of impressive stature when Genghis Khan invaded the valley, the Red Fort held out against the invaders. According to my understanding of history, Genghis Khan's favorite grandson was killed during the attack. That really pissed of Genghis Khan. The Red Fort and, as I mentioned earlier, the entire valley including Shahr-e-Gholghola in Bamiyan proper was laid waste at his orders. The Red Fort is a nice archaeological ruin. However, the ubiquitous landmines discourage visitors!

Less than 10 kilometers west of town was Dragon Valley, Dara Sokhtdar, a geologically fascinating site. At the upper end of the valley stood a huge natural wall formed over ions of time by percolating water. The wall ran for almost 200 meters across the back of the valley. The base of the wall was perhaps ten meters wide. Along the top ran a deep, meter-wide crack that transected then entire wall like the scaly spine of a dragon. According to legend, a dragon terrorized locals, demanding each day a young girl and the occasional camel to eat. Until that is, Islam's dragon slayer Hazrat Ali split the beast in two with his sword and sparking a mass conversion to Islam. The depth of the crack was about four to six feet, no more than a couple of meters. At the very end of the wall, thermal water seeped from a tiny spot, creating minute rimstone dams, supposedly the tears from the eyes of the dragon.

About seventy-five kilometers west of Bamiyan in the Koh-e-Baba mountain range is a more famous geologic feature, Band-i-Amir Lakes. The string of seven lakes is truly a natural wonder of the world. In March 2008, a State Magazine cover story described Band-i-Amir. The cover had a crisp picture of the deep blue water lakes. Coincidently, in May 2004 earlier I wrote a State Magazine Bamiyan article and included a photo of Band-i-Amir. The seven lakes and their retaining walls formed naturally when cold carbonate-saturated water seeped from the surrounding Cretaceous clastic rock. The natural process created massive limestone dams, fifteen meters in height. The deep vivid blue water of the lakes is evidence of high carbonic concentrations. In ordinary times, Band-i-Amir would be a tremendous tourist attraction. I am not exaggerating its stark beauty.

A few months after I left Bamiyan, I wrote a short article for the NSS News entitled "Are There Caves in the Hindu Kush?" In the article I described Band-i-Amir and Dragon Valley and included a couple of photos. Dr. Calvin Alexander, an old-time caver and Professor of Geology and Geophysics at the University of Minnesota, contacted me. He asked for more photos of Band-i-Amir which I sent. He got back to me immediately. The geology of the lakes, he said, appeared to be remarkably similar to geologic features sighted by the Mars Surveyor on the Red Planet! His photographs confirmed the uncanny resemblance. One more piece of evidence for Mars' hydrological history.

Bamiyan Province's spider web of steep valleys contained tiny habitations. It is amazing where people can live. Rugged dirt trails, one can hardly call them roads, led up these hidden valleys which the Kiwis patrolled. The locals led a tough existence on small plots of land. Although not as widespread as elsewhere in Afghanistan, some poppy was being cultivated. Poppy provided farmers a more attractive rate of return on investment than wheat or any other crop.

Ten rugged hours north of Bamiyan was a former American fire base built when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in late 2001. Fire Base Romero, named for a soldier killed in battle, was situated in a strategic passage between Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamiyan. To swing behind the Taliban to get to Kabul from the rear, the pass was a logical strategic location. When the Taliban front collapsed north of Bagram, I assume the base was not really required. The Kiwis turned the abandoned site into a patrol base for the northern portion of the province. They repaired and occupied a corner of the former fire base.

During the short period of its existence Fire Base Romero was the largest American fire base since the Vietnam War. Numerous wooden barracks had been partially constructed. As I noted, the Kiwis occupied only a tiny fraction of the facility. The American CAT team I described earlier hired local carpenters to bang down the wooden barracks. They hammered the wood into simple school furniture. I participated on the delivery of some wooden benches and desks to a local primary school which contained both boys and girls - in segregated classes, of course. Not quite like turning swords into plowshares but a similar theme.

Q: No artillery?

COHEN: No artillery. Romero was a fire base without the fire set smack in the middle of a high mountain range, near the village of Doabi. From Bamiyan the road to the fire base zigzagged through stark landscape and numerous little hamlets. Semi-warlords, armed mujahideen militia, alleged Taliban mullahs, etc., kept things active. I traveled to the fire base with a TV journalist from New Zealand, Cameron Bennett. At the fire base, we filmed an interview which was aired on New Zealand TV on their equivalent to the U.S. program 60 Minutes.

Q: Why don't we discuss what you were doing?

COHEN: In 2003 when I was in Bamiyan, no playbook yet existed for State Department representatives at non-American PRTs. (In fact, no real playbook existed for officers at American PRTs.) PRTs were still a new, evolving concept. State Department representatives, it was felt, would serve as facilitators, but facilitators for what? What does "institution building" really imply? What does "capacity building" mean? What is the relationship with non-American military? The Kiwis took their orders from Wellington, not Washington. What is the division of responsibilities with the USAID representative? Invariably in the PRTs, the USAID representatives were not direct hire employees but contractors. To mediate and resolve disputes how involved does one get? There was no formal guidance.

Before reaching Bamiyan, I conferred with the charge d'affaires David Sedney. "Larry," he said, "you are going to get a lot of demands to write cables and do traditional political officer reporting." That was all well and good, he said. However, your raison d'ï¿½tre really is to think strategically. I thought that was an excellent piece of advice. Try not to get caught up in the daily grind of meeting deadlines and writing reports. Think how to contribute to the strategic issues and how to mold policy. David's advice was really the best. I think all PRTers should follow that line.

If the Kiwis were suspicious of my role, they never let on. Except for an Iridium satellite phone that worked sporadically and must have cost Uncle Sam quite a bit for calls, I did not have my own communications; I depended on the Kiwis completely. To use the Iridium phone, I had to position myself in an open area, usually at night. I pointed the phone antenna upward to catch, hopefully, one of the company's 66 low orbit satellites passing overhead. Since they were in low orbit, the satellites passed over very quickly. Calls could be swiftly cut off. In the Hindu Kush the phones were notoriously unreliable. That was how I communicated with the outside world. I got through to Washington and Brazil easier than I could get through to Kabul. I called Marla in Brazil. But to get through to the embassy on the Iridium phone was difficult. To be outside in the wind and chill of a Bamiyan December night while placing a call is not easily forgotten.

With my embassy laptop I produced reports. But I had no secure method of delivering reports except through the New Zealand military communications system. The Kiwis had their own communications link which went to Wellington. The PRT had an Internet hookup, again, satellite dependent and unreliable. To send messages and reports, I used Hotmail.

Q: Hotmail is a form of e-mail.

COHEN: Correct. I used a Hotmail account to communicate to the embassy and the rest of the outside world. Two years later in Herat, I utilized a Yahoo account. I kept most of what I wrote completely unclassified which cables went to the embassy on the open Internet. For sensitive stuff I could access the Kiwi military system. It meant, however, that communications transited Wellington, then perhaps CENTCOM command in Tampa, then Bagram before reaching the embassy. It was a very circuitous route with no assurance that it would get to the right recipient at the other end. I contributed each evening to the PRT's daily operations report which went through the Kiwi system every day to Bagram. I told the embassy that this report was the best source of information. It certainly reached the defense attachï¿½. However, the embassy political section persistently seemed to have difficulties either getting access to it or remembering to do so. And they were so overworked.

Q: What sort of things were you doing?

COHEN: Good governance and civic development were critical areas of attention. I did not think specifically in those terms. The Kiwis and I met with Governor Mohammad Raheem Aliyar, police chief Fahimi, the local militia brigade commander Neg Mohammad, the head of intelligence Paikar, and various other ministry officials stationed in Bamiyan. With Governor Aliyar, I acted as sort of an advisor without being an advisor. We sought to influence the governor into making proper decisions based on justice and reason. The police chief was a tougher nut to crack. Fahimi looked like the late actor John Belushi out of the movie Animal House. His dark beard and wild hair seemed to swallow his face. But it was his Mongol eyes that really caught your attention.

One particularly renegade militia sub-commander, Sirhan Wafa, operated out of the southern part of Bamiyan Province, the districts of Waras and Panjao. He caused havoc among the local population, mayhem and even murder. The PRT received numerous complaints about him. The provincial authorities threw up their hands. The Kiwis were being cautious about how to approach the issue. Fortunately, in early 2004 the UNAMA political officer, Gayane Afrikian, traveled to the area and convinced Wafa to turn himself in. It was a courageous effort on her part. We had other cases like this one.

I examined Bamiyan's social situation and ascertained the needs of the inhabitants. Maintaining a close liaison with NGOs was critical. Manuel, the U.S. Department of Agriculture representative, and I observed Bamiyan's harvest. The desperate need for basic agricultural technology and extension services was obvious. For example, the potato harvest absorbed a considerable amount of child labor. Children who otherwise might have been in school sorted potatoes for weeks. At one corner of the PRT was a pile of scrap wood. One afternoon soon after our arrival, Manuel hammered together a potato sorter. The next day we placed the sorter on the rear of a flatbed truck and carried it to a nearby potato field. Manuel placed it next to a pile of potatoes for the farmers to test. The potatoes were placed in the top of the sorter; the smaller potatoes fell through the narrow slots. Those that fell through the slots were the seed potatoes for sowing the next spring. The width of the slits determined what size seed potatoes fell through them. The larger eating potatoes were collected at the end of the sorter. It was simple technology. The farmers tested it and provided comments.

With the feedback of the farmerto widen or narrow the slots - Manuel took the sorter back to the PRT and made the adjustments. Lo and behold, he had created a low technology innovation that potentially saved an enormous amount of labor, mostly child labor! How to get sorters to Afghan potato farmers and allow children to attend school rather than sort potatoes? For the cost of scrap wood, perhaps some Afghan entrepreneur could manufacture these sorters in a cottage industry and develop a market for the product.

Before I reached Bamiyan, I conversed with the public affairs officer in Kabul, Roy Glover. Roy suggested I develop an International Visitors (IV) program targeting mullahs from Hazarajat. He wanted a program with Shiite mullahs who might travel to the United States on a multi-week IV program. I thought pursing this was a good idea. In Bamiyan I discussed the idea with the senior representative of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, Jawad Zohar. Jawad, a very pleasant fellow, agreed to set everything up. We worked quickly since Ramadan was fast approaching. Jawad sent word throughout Hazarajat's hamlets. Many tiny villages had only a tenuous connection by radio. To others, a message was sent by foot. We set a date in late October for the interested mullahs to come to Bamiyan where I would interview them.

On the appointed day, the Hazara mullahs arrived at Jawad's MFA office, only a few hundred meters from the Buddhas. In a reception room, I met the mullahs, twenty-five in total. All but three were Shia Hazara. One by one, using one of the young interpreters from the PRT, I interviewed each mullah. Their backgrounds were uniformly humble. Almost all claimed to have been with the mujahideen. Hardly any had formal education beyond receiving basic religious education at madrassa. Their answers were pretty standard and I suspected the interpreter may have biased or tilted the answers a bit. Yet, all the mullahs had a presence that I found appealing.

I rank ordered the IV candidates and sent the names to the embassy Public Diplomacy (PD) section. I also crafted a report on the views the mullahs expressed which to me seemed remarkably more liberal about women than I expected, and far more open-minded than the three Sunni mullahs. "If you addressed an American audience, mixed with men and women, how would you feel?" I asked. "How would you respond to questions about the rights of women in Afghanistan?" I took it all down, wrote up the IV nominations, and drafted a report for the embassy.

Q: Did anybody from the embassy check on you?

COHEN: A few embassy and Washington visitors reached the PRT. Department of Defense Deputy Assistant Secretary for Stability Operations, Dr. Joseph Collins, flew in by C-130 aircraft with a small delegation. The embassy refugee and migration officer, David Rollman, visited USG-funded refugee projects around Bamiyan. A three person General Accounting Office (GAO) team performed some site visits. Before I arrived, Senator John McCain visited Bamiyan. Reportedly, he upset the U.S. soldiers who prior to his arrival vigorously cleaned the PRT - no cigarette butts on the ground - in preparation for the visit. When McCain arrived in Bamiyan, he visited the Buddhas then reboarded his helicopter. He did not meet the soldiers or tour the PRT as planned.

Our most important visitor was Prime Minister Clark who spent a day and a half at the PRT. She visited the Buddhas and hiked up Shahr-e-Gholghola. The Kiwis took her around the bazaar. She met local officials and thanked them for their kindness to the New Zealand PRT. The PRT held a dinner in her honor. I will get to another facet of her visit in a moment.

An unusual visitor was the "richest Kiwi," a telecom magnate named Alan Gibbs. The Kiwis described him as the Bill Gates of New Zealand. Gibbs rented a Russian helicopter to fly to Bamiyan with some friends from Kabul. Among his passengers was Robert Young Pelton, author of The World's Most Dangerous Places. The PRT gave Gibbs and his friends the red carpet welcome and we briefed him. Gibbs allowed me to return to Kabul on the helicopter. It was my first and probably last flight on a Russian helicopter. The cabin was spacious and carpeted, quite a change from flying in a Blackhawk.

Let me return to the Helen Clark visit. A few days before her scheduled arrival, Manuel and I attended a PRT conference in Bagram. We prepared to depart by helicopter early the next morning to Bamiyan. This was two days before Prime Minister Clark's visit, so everyone at the PRT was preparing for the visit. To reach the tarmac from our overnight barracks in the visitor tent was our first challenge that morning. Bagram's main artery, Disney Avenue, is a hardtop road that runs the length of the base and parallels the tarmac. From 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. every morning, the road was closed for PT (physical training). Joggers in gray military togs ran up and down Disney Avenue. We started from the wrong side of Disney Avenue from the airstrip. Since we had heavy luggage, we needed a vehicle. Just trying to cross the street cost us valuable time! The Military Police treated us as if by crossing Disney Avenue with our damn vehicle, we were committing an act of moral turpitude.

What does that say about the U.S. mission? Is it to carry out orders, assist Afghanistan, and get out, eventually? Or is the mission to do PT? In Bagram, PT apparently took precedence over anything else for one hour each morning. A group of Kiwis had to drive back to Bamiyan, an all day slog up the mountains. They could not get out of the compound until 7:00 a.m. because Disney Avenue was closed for PT! We finally got our gear and ourselves across to the tarmac. We waited to board a Blackhawk helicopter to Bamiyan. A half dozen Kiwis needed in Bamiyan to prepare for the Clark visit were with us. Cases of food to be served during the Prime Minister's visit, not the regular army chow, and ammunition would also go with us on the Blackhawk. If the U.S. President were visiting, the military would not serve MREs (meals ready to eat).

While we waited on the tarmac, the chopper pilot came over to speak with us. He had bad news. The helicopter did not have enough room for all of us and the boxes of food and ammunition. Some of us were going to have to remain behind. He instructed the Kiwis to stay. They responded that they had a mission. "Sorry, there is no room." We spoke to the pilot and convinced him to take a couple of the Kiwis. Finally, he relented. Then, he would not let the boxes on board. Again, there was discussion about weight, etc. and he again allowed some of the 50 cal. ammunition onto his Blackhawk. Manuel and I got on the plane. The other Kiwis and all the food were left stranded.

As we prepared for takeoff, I noticed another Blackhawk about 100 meters away was being loaded with military. I did not think twice about it. We took off and headed for Bamiyan. The other chopper flew parallel to us. We landed in Bamiyan. That other Blackhawk landed as well about 75 meters away. We descended and unloaded the ammunition. From the other helicopter, soldiers emerged and started taking pictures of the Buddhas. We were perplexed. Not enough room for the Kiwis but enough space on a second flight for these joy-riders? The two choppers were on the ground for five minutes. Then the soldiers with their cameras reboarded the second Blackhawk. Both helicopters, the one we disembarked from now empty, took off and returned to Bagram. If I was flabbergasted, imagine the Kiwis and Colonel Neville Riley. The Colonel is hosting his Prime Minister coming in a couple of days. Soldiers, food, and ammunition sitting at Bagram could not get up to the PRT, bumped for picture-taking joy riders.

I was pissed. The Kiwis were upset but were way too nice to make a federal case out of this. Not me. I wrote a scathing message about the incident in the daily report that evening. I mentioned in an aside that Colonel Reilly commented that if this is how the New Zealand PRT is treated, perhaps the PRT would be better under NATO command rather than the U.S.-led Coalition. That statement got attention. I copied my report to the embassy. It was read by many key folks. Soon after, Colonel Riley received a phone call from the American commander in Bagram. He was told to come down right after the Clark visit. I assume it was ostensibly one of those "come to Jesus meetings." The Colonel was put on the carpet. But the Americans promised that such behavior by Bagram air control, bumping the PRT folks and allowing military tourists to fly, would not be tolerated again.

The Kiwis did nothing wrong. It had been atrocious behavior by American Air Force air traffic folks at Bagram. Although Colonel Reilly was initially unhappy with my method, I sensed that after the incident, my prestige among the Kiwis was solidified because I stood up for them.

The U.S. base at Bagram was a complete disaster. Much of what goes on never reaches the U.S. press. Bagram, the former Soviet air base, is the principal U.S. military facility in Afghanistan. Thousands served there. Unfortunately, Bagram seemed to possess too many officers and enlisted men with not enough to do. In a military environment like that, all sorts of inane rules crept into the mission structure. Soldiers just walking on Disney Avenue had to salute superior officers. Everyone was constantly saluting. Officers and enlisted men arrived in Bagram by airplane. Many spent their entire one year tour in Bagram and never left the wire. Some went stir crazy. Perhaps that was the rationale for the second Blackhawk. Soldiers just needed to get away, even if only for ten minutes to take pictures.

If I ran Bagram, I would attempt to assure that all personnel on the base had an opportunity to get off somehow, whether it be on a civil affairs mission to paint a school or whatever. Carry your weapon, wear body armor. Do a little patrolling. But force soldiers to do more than sit on base, hunkering down with nothing to do but run to the clam shell gym or eat greasy Halliburton-KBR food - hamburgers, hotdogs, fried chicken, French fries - at the DIFAC. Bagram reflected all the worst attributes of our efforts in Afghanistan.

In 2006, not during my time in Bamiyan, I returned to Bagram with Italian officers from the Herat PRT to attend a PRT commanders' conference. By this time housing facilities at Bagram were vastly improved. Yet, the senior Italian officers were assigned lodging in a tent while the rest of us were assigned billets in "Motel 8" where eight or ten visitors had cots in a large room. Motel 8 was far more comfortable that the tents. To billet senior officers in tents was incredibly poor treatment.

In my view, the worst morale buster which exemplified the poor treatment of our soldiers was General Order No. 1. General Order No. 1 applied to the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR) in the war theatre. The order stipulated zero tolerance for alcohol consumption. General Order No. 1, I believe, was a post-Vietnam reaction to the abuses that took place in Vietnam. To me, zero tolerance for alcohol meant many things, most of them negative. Soldiers of all ages, all fields, and all professions serve in the U.S. military today. Many are reservists and National Guardsmen, perhaps in their 40s, some in their 50s, and not a few are in their 60s. I met National Guardsmen who were grandfathers and grandmothers, people whose life experiences varied widely. They served in the National Guard by choice. Most are quite mature compared to soldiers of previous generations. Many were called back to active duty and deployment. Did the military command not have enough respect or trust in these people to allow them a beer once in a while? What message did this send? Afghanistan is a war zone where plenty of tension and repressed energy never gets released.

The Brits had a much better idea. Over Thanksgiving I spent a week at the Mazar-e-Sharif PRT run by Great Britain. Tom Hudson, a retired Foreign Service Officer served at the Mazar PRT. The trip afforded me an opportunity to compare PRT operations. The British commander allowed his men when off duty a two beer limit between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. There appeared to be no abuse. The soldiers enjoyed a beer, watched television, read a book, hung out. This made sense. The British treated their soldiers with respect and provided them a chance to unwind. The PRT mess line had Indian/Pakistani cuisinquite a few Gurkhas served at the PRT - and British food. Under Colonel Davis the PRT functioned well. At the time Mazar-e-Sharif was an urban PRT; when authority was transferred to Sweden a year later, the PRT was relocated to a site outside of town.

Unfortunately, since the Kiwis came under American Coalition authority, not NATO or ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force, the New Zealand PRT followed General Order No. 1. Before the end of the Crib One rotation, Colonel Riley allowed one blowout party with beer. Too bad I missed it. I was in Mazar at the time. I understood from Manuel it was a real blast. The soldiers completely unwound from the tension from all the missions. Before I left Afghanistan for the second time in August 2006, I commented to Ambassador Ronald Newman that, in my opinion, General Order No. 1 was the biggest detriment to morale amongst our military.

Q: What had happened to the warlord _____?

COHEN: Dostum? I am not expert on the political machinations of warlords in Mazar-e-Sharif, Balkh Province. Two rival warlords dominated the Mazar region, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek warlord and Ustad Atta Mohammad Noor, the Tajik. Both led major Northern Alliance Mujahideen factions against the Taliban. By 2003 after the establishment of the Interim Transitional Government under Hamid Karzai, a mini civil war almost broke out in Balkh between the two feuding warlords. Forces loyal to each attacked the other side. Karzai brought Dostum to Kabul where he became, in early 2005, chief of staff to the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. In 2004 Atta was appointed governor of Balkh Province. He was still governor when I met him in February 2008. Dostum's wings were clipped.

Tom Hudson stationed at the PRT in Mazar admired Dostul am not sure why. Dostum had switched sides repeatedly since Soviet times. His warlord influence over northern Afghanistan among the Uzbeks was fairly pervasive, in the same order of magnitude as Ismael Khan's influence in Herat and Karim Khalili's influence among the Hazara in Bamiyan.

I visited Tom in Mazar. The day before Thanksgiving 2003, Tom a U.S. major assigned to Mazar-e-Sharif, Monty Zimmerman, and I traveled to Uzbekistan. Major Zimmerman drove Tom's official car. The Brits did not trust Tom behind the wheel. The PRT escorted us to the bridge at Termez. We went through formalities with the Afghan border authorities, basically just drinking chai. The border guards were from Dostum's faction did not care about passports. They treated us respectfully.

We crossed the Soviet-built Friendship Bridge. A new border crossing facility stood menacingly on the Uzbek side, built, I believe, with World Bank financing. The facility was state-of-the-art - and completely unused. What commerce crossed between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan? Despite the lack of business, Uzbek customs and immigration procedures kept us there two hours. Finally, the head of the border station shared borscht and other local food with us. Tom's excellent Russian helped tremendously. We made our way into Termez proper where, for documentation purposes, we had to meet somebody from the United Nations office who had "invited" us to Uzbekistan. The documentation process was Byzantine. Literally, to enter Uzbekistan a visitor must be invited. From Termez we drove to the U.S. logistics base at K2, Karshi-Khanabad, since closed down. We gassed up the vehicle, visited the PX (Post Exchange) and the APO (army post office), and continued two more hours to the ancient city of Bukhara.

Tom was familiar with Bukhara and led us to "Sasha's bed and breakfast", a quaint B&B with pleasant rooms. We visited the city's ancient mosques, mausoleums, and markets. Late Thursday, Major Zimmerman and I returned to K2 for Thanksgiving dinner with the troops. We returned late that night to Bukhara. Since a small Jewish community still existed in Bukhara for Friday evening I suggested we attend Jewish services. Tom and I went to Shabbat services where we met a young American Chabad rabbi, David Holtzberg.

Q: Chabad meaning?

COHEN: The Chabad-Lubavitch movement promotes Judaism and Orthodox Jewish traditions, particularly among poorly served communities throughout the world. I had met Chabad rabbis in Ukraine, Nigeria, and elsewhere. They provide religious support in the most out of the way places. Chabad men generally dress in traditional black suits so they are easily identifiable. Judaism does not have missionaries. There is no proselytizing in Judaism. But to support fragments of Jewish communities that still exist is considered a mission equal to performing a good deed. Over a Shabbat meal hosted by a local family, Tom and I enjoyed speaking with David. We told him about our work in Afghanistan. David became very excited. He said he had been trying to get to Afghanistan and even had an Afghan visa. David explained that his mission was to seek the lost Afghan torah. The Jewish community of Kabul, consisting of just two men who occupied the dilapidated Kabul synagogue, had shared possession of the ancient torah when the Taliban minister of interior confiscated it. Both Jews were taken into custody and tortured. They were eventually released, but the torah disappeared. David's mission in Afghanistan was to try to find it.

I first learned about the synagogue from a Jewish USAID officer at the embassy. However, this was the first time I received a full explanation about the torah. Tom was moved by David's story and offered to take him back with us to Afghanistan. Tom instructed David to meet us at the traffic circle outside the K2 base at noon on Sunday. This was Tom's idea, not mine.

From Bukhara, Tom, Monty and I traveled to Samarkand. We visited more sites and drove to K2 on Sunday. After tortuous entry procedures at the K2 checkpoints which cost us much precious timTom had a case of wine in the trunk and K2, being under infamous General Order No. 1, would not allow it onto the base - we fueled up and mailed our newly purchased carpets and other knickknacks. Then, we returned to the traffic circle. We were a little late but David was waiting for us. The four of us drove back to Afghanistan.

When we arrived at the PRT with our passenger, the Brits were chagrined. But Tom was unfazed by the commotion. Since David kept strict kosher, he never entered the mess line. He lived on sardines and bread. Our next major challenge was to get David to Kabul. We lent David some cash since he arrived in Afghanistan almost penniless. Regular flights between Kabul and other Afghan cities were still in their infancy. First, Tom sought placing David on a military flight; that did not work out. Finally, he got him on an Ariana flight to Kabul. By this time I had already departed for Kabul and Bamiyan via UNHAS flights. Imagine a rabbi in Kabul. David visited the synagogue and interviewed Ishaq Levin and Zebulon Simatov, the two Jews. After a couple of days in Kabul, he flew out on a weekly flight to Tashkent.

David's mission was unsuccessful. He did not locate the missing torah. But I did visit the synagogue. The Jewish community of Kabul was, as I said, down to two men. Ishaq Levin was in his mid-70s; Zebulon Simatov was 40ish. The rest of the Jewish community had fled the country. Many Jews left Afghanistan in 1967 after the Six day War; others departed during the socialist regime and following the Soviet invasion. By the time the Taliban took power, the entire community was gone except for the two men. Most went to Israel, some to the United States. As long as Jews lived in Afghanistan, the torah remained behind with them. Because of the maltreatment by the Taliban, both men suspected the other of ratting them out. Even though both resided in the decrepit synagogue, they refused to communicate with each other. Ishaq lived in the former sanctuary, Zebulon upstairs in one of the side rooms. They hated each other. This situation persisted for years following the end of the Taliban regime. I met separately with both men in late 2003. I spoke with Ishaq through my pidgin Hebrew, with Zebulon through a little bit of Dari and a bit of English. It was quite a revelation.

I tried to enlist assistance from Afghan authorities in the search for the torah. While common belief held that the Taliban would have destroyed the torah, I suspected the Taliban might have preserved it since the torah contained the word of God - if the Taliban were aware of that, a big if. A Taliban official might have attempted to hide or sell it. I prepared a short memo to Ambassador Khalilzad giving what I knew about this issue. I also visited the assistant to then Minister of Interior Jalali, since it was the Taliban minister of interior who allegedly took the torah. I believe Tom even tried to enlist congressional attention back in Washington, although I do not see how that might have helped. We just tried to keep the issue percolating. There has been no progress on finding this torah, and I do not think we will find it.

Two postscripts to this saga: In January 2005, Ishaq Levin, the older of the two men, died. The state of Israel repatriated him back to Jerusalem where he is buried. Today, Zebulon Simatov is Afghanistan's last Jew. I last saw him in 2006 and again tried to see him in October late 2007, but he was not in.

Postscript number two occurred in 2006 when I was assigned to Herat. At one time, perhaps a century ago, Herat was the center of Afghanistan's Jewish universe. As recently as the 1960s, it had at least four synagogues. During the mujahideen times, all were either destroyed or in the case of one, converted into a mosque. Although the Jewish community no longer exists, the cemetery is still watched by an Afghan caretaker.

In the city museum in Herat, a barebones place that was rarely open, I noticed a portion of a torah scroll locked in a glass case. Torah is written on parchment; the museum appeared to have about 20 feet of a torah scroll. The museum caretaker knew vaguely it was Jewish, but had no idea what the scroll was. In the case the Hebrew lettering was upside down since no one was even aware of the script. I could not read it through the glass case and wanted to get a closer look. I went to the provincial minister of culture who was a contact and asked permission to have the glass case opened. He gave his approval. The caretaker took out a key chain with about 1,000 keys on it. He played dramatically with the keys until he found the right one to open the case. We extracted the scroll and laid it out so that I could photograph it. My pictures did not come out well but well enough. I sent them back to Washington to Rabbi Lia Bass in Arlington, Virginia. She said that at least one portion of the parchment was from the Book of Exodus and another possibly from the Book of Deuteronomy. This is insufficient evidence that this was a part of the lost Afghan torah. I do not know its age or how it got there. The museum people were not helpful. It is probably the last remnant of Judaica in Afghanistan, except for the cemetery.

Q: How long would a normal torah be?

COHEN: Perhaps around 120 feet for a typical torah. A torah contains every chapter from Genesis through Deuteronomy, written in columns, and there are, I believe, 245 columns. So it depends on the width of a column in a particular torah

Just to find a bit of a torah scroll in Afghanistan is quite remarkable. I will get to that a little later when I discuss my Herat experience.

I want to offer one other story that serves to illustrate Afghanistan. Before I left Bamiyan to return to Brazil, I was invited by the National Directorate for Security (NDS) chief Paikar - NDS is the Afghan intelligence service - to the Kabul wedding party of his son. He provided me a date, time, and the venue, a wedding hall in Kabul. Normally, those three pieces of information would be sufficient to find an event. In mid-December I reached Kabul where I stayed at the embassy. Motor pool provided me a ride to the wedding hall on the north side of Kabul. I reached the hall more or less on time which is quite early for Afghans. I sat around and met some people. A few spoke some English. They asked who I was. I explained I was invited by Paikar in Bamiyan, etc. They did not react, one way or the other. I was served nuts and chai. Eventually, the wedding party began. There was a band and a partition between the men and women; the men were on the right, women on the left. The party became quite crowded. I was treated like a guest or honor. Men came up and spoke to me all evening. Some wanted me to dance, men with men. It was quite an event.

I was surprised that I never saw Paikar. At his son's wedding, would he not be present? Being that Paikar was from Bamiyan, I assumed it would be a Hazara wedding. It did not occur to me that a Hazara would marry a Pashtun or something like that. Anyway, the event is going on, the meal is served, the dancing, etc. Eventually, the embassy vehicle returned to pick me up. A thought struck me like a thunderbolt. This was not the right wedding! Sure enough, there was not a Hazara in the hall. It was a Tajik wedding. How could I know the difference between a Hazara and Tajik wedding party?

By the time this thought occurred to me, it was time for me to leave. I congratulated the family, expressed my appreciation, gave kisses on both cheeks, and left.

Q: After Bamiyan you went to Brazil?

COHEN: Yes. The Afghanistan assignment was a TDY, a temporary assignment of three months. I returned to Brazil and continued my assignment there.

I mentioned earlier the challenges we had with the Brazilians, problems with our own policy. We also had issues within the embassy. I will provide one example.

During U.S. presidential elections, embassies and consulates host election night events, usually handled by the Public Diplomacy (PD) section. Journalists and other local contacts are invited. Since the 1980s, U.S. missions have had the capability to receive some sort of live television hook up, including Voice of America, the USIS WorldNet system, and later CNN. U.S. elections are our special opportunity as Americans to show off our true democratic traditions. Having live feeds from the U.S. provide real time drama.

Every country in which I served had a democratic tradition or process of some nature, perhaps decades (Mexico, India, arguably Brazil) or just a year or two (Honduras, Hungary, Nigeria, even Afghanistan). Locals seemed to possess great interest, affinity and eagerness to compare electoral processes and talk about U.S. democracy. In 2000, the Lagos PD section hosted a well attended election night party for the presidential elections. The event received good local press coverage. Invariably on election nights, participating Americans attempt to explain the Electoral College system. Different commentators, perhaps a local political science professor, sometimes speak on election topics.

As we approached the November 2004 elections, the embassy front office seemed uninterested in an election night event. I inquired of the public affairs officer. His response stunned me. Given the sensitivities from the Iraq War, the ambassador and DCM apparently feared inflaming Brazilian anti-Americanism. Brazilian public opinion overwhelming opposed the Iraq War. On Iraq resolutions, Brazil had not been very helpful to us at the United Nations. However, embassies do not treat U.S. elections in partisan fashion. I urged that we at least honor the democratic process. I was told "If you want to do it, do it."

However, the embassy did not the event on the embassy compound. Plus, there was no budget. The Marine Security Guard Detachment consented to host the event at the Marine House. Marine House in Brasilia was spacious with a large common room perfect for a large flat screen TV. I organized the event, obtained the red, white, and blue decorations, and sent out invitations to the diplomatic community, government officials, journalists, and academics. Turn out was not overwhelming, but it was okay. We served traditional American election cuisine: hamburgers and hotdogs. I set up an Electoral College tally sheet for tabulating the Electoral College votes. Ambassador John Danilovich showed up. He was all smiles when incumbent President George Bush pulled ahead. Even today I still cannot fathom why an embassy would not want to exploit election night for a big event.

After I returned from Afghanistan, I conducted outreach to Brazilian audiences, usually college students, to explain our mission in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was still pretty exotic in 2004. I possessed a lot of nice Afghan pictures which made a good PowerPoint presentation. While Brazilian popular opinion may not have been supportive of U.S. efforts in Iraq, Brazilians possessed inherent sympathy for what we were doing in Afghanistan. In the back of my mind, I held the possibility that Brazil, which was by then deeply involved in Haitian peacekeeping, might become interested in contributing in Afghanistan. I delivered presentations in Portuguese and English, answered lots of excellent questions. I was not prepared to speak about Iraq. Brazilian college students understood our objectives in Afghanistan and, I sensed, supported them. To assist the Defense Attachï¿½, I gave a similar talk to military attachï¿½s. They were far more interested in some of the military aspects of what was going on.

From a policy and reporting perspective, I do not feel I accomplished very much. I mentioned a long investigative cable about Itamaraty, the Brazilian foreign ministry. Alessandra Lisboa, the political section FSN, and I examined the Brazilian Foreign Service's complicated written and then oral exam, at the questions asked on the exam, to gauge its bias. We made some startling conclusions. Yet, at the end of the day and after drafting a long three-part cable with dozens of paragraphs, the political counselor, Dennis Hearne, sat on it. Despite the research and the light it shed on a particularly difficult topic, the analytical report never saw the light of day in a cable back to Washington.

Q: Often you get these reports, you put the work in, somebody pops up, that is not what I really wanted. Were you able to send it?

COHEN: I forwarded a few draft copies back channel. A think piece like that is not typical spot reporting. Moreover, the topic was in the post reporting plan. When you finally do the research on a think piece, some conclusions may not fit into preconceived notions. I am sure this happens to many reporting officers in the course of their careers. It may be too difficult to alter the conclusions since the analysis may point clearly to drawing those conclusions.

I will mention again what we surmised. Even though Brazil's Foreign Service is highly regarded and respected throughout the world, it is also severely flawed. One key reason is the manner by which it selects its officers which leads to the paucity of minorities, especially Afro-Brazilians, in their Foreign Service. The process tilted towards the children of diplomats and others from Brazil's wealthy and well-connected elite. Many spent time abroad, a rare opportunity for most Brazilians. The self-selecting process assured a very narrow Foreign Service, similar to the United States two, three generations ago.

Brazil's "leftist" foreign policy results, in part, from the leadership of their Foreign Service, of Itamaraty. The radical student generation of the 1960s is still in charge. They are the elder statesmen, so to speak, of Brazil's Foreign Service. They assure that their curriculum is taught to their new Foreign Service officers. In Brazil every incoming Foreign Service officer goes through a rigorous one-two year program at Rio Branco. The program includes language study and political science. In the U.S. system candidates are not "re-taught" history and political science; in Brazil the system indoctrinates these officers into Itamaraty's vision of what they should be.

Q: I have always been dubious about it. Imagine if I ask a Brazilian diplomat when you were in school, what sort of summer jobs and after school work did you have? Where did you get your hands dirty? You do not find much.

COHEN: I suspect not. It is almost like an aristocracy. All Brazilian diplomats are extremely sharp and sophisticated. Person for person, the Brazilian Foreign Service Officers were absolutely professional. But all reflected, to some extent, Brazil's very narrow elite. Brazil is a democracy, certainly. But the bureaucracy centered in Brasilia overwhelmingly controls the country and puts our bureaucracy to shame. Brazil's foreign ministry, unlike the State Department, is the strong right, or should I say left arm of government. Not quite true with us - unfortunately.

Q: It is interesting when you think about it. I made this point when we talked about this before. With all its size, the well trained Foreign Service and aland I have been doing interviews for 22 years - the impact of Brazil on other countries, from our observation, is nil.

COHEN: I agree. Given its size, its sheer ability to dominate South America, its economic power, its potential, all these factors, Brazil remarkably is a relative pygmy when it comes to global influence, despite incredible natural resources and a huge industrial and agricultural base. The nation produces brilliant bureaucrats, including members of its Foreign Service. Yet at the end of the day, it is remarkable how little Brazil influences the world. Brazilians are aware of this, I suspect. During the last five or six years, Brazil has built bridges with African nations, with the Middle East, with other countries in South America. Under President Lula, an enormous effort has gone into building relationships with non-traditional partners, particularly African countries beyond the Lusophone countries of Angola and Mozambique. In an effort to boost Brazil's importance, President Lula traveled widely throughout the world.

I noted before that in 2005, Brazil hosted the Arab-South American Summit in Brasilia. The event reflected Brazil's new foreign policy ambitions. From the Arab countries, only a couple of leaders attended. We were successful in getting new Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to attend. Some South American leaders showed up. Argentine President Nestor Carlos Kirchner came and left very quickly. Alan Garcia from Peru was there. Clearly, Brazil is seeking to be a major global player. Lula reached out to China. In an exchange of visits, Lula went to China in May 2004 and Chinese President Hu Jintao traveled to Brasilia that November while on a South American tour.

When dealing with the Chinese, Brazilian diplomatic negotiating skills were severely tested. Some felt Lula gave too much to the Chinese on trade. I will not get into the details. Perhaps it was a wake up call to Brazilian diplomats as to how good the Chinese were at protecting their own national interests. To its credit, Itamaraty seemed to recognize its inherent weakness and tried to do something about it.

What about the bilateral relationship with the United States? As I mentioned, during the first Bush term, the administration gave scant attention to Brazil. Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Brazil in October of 2004, just weeks before he left office. That was the first secretary of state visit to Brazil during the Bush administration. Imagine a secretary of state not going to Brazil in four years. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Brazil in March 2005. That was his first visit, even though Brazil the Western Hemisphere's second largest nation next to the United States.

Bush reached Brazil in November 2005 after, I believe, he attended meetings in Santiago, Chile. He transited Brazil on a weekend, a Saturday night. He deserves credit for stopping in Brazil, I guess. A stop over in Brazil on a weekend sounds like a typical CODEL's visit to Rio de Janeiro. Is it a sign of seriousness when you arrive on Saturday and leave on Sunday?

Q: You left Brazil when?

COHEN: I left on June 1, 2005.

Q: And then what?

COHEN: Marla remained in Brasilia. She had one more year to go in her assignment. I went back to Washington, took some time off, and then had five or six weeks of Dari language training. My assignment was again Afghanistan. I spent much of the summer in preparation. I did have a medical issue that complicated my life with the Medical Unit. I received my med clearance just days before getting on the plane.

I arrived in Kabul on September 29, 2005. In preparation for the PRT assignment in Herat, I spent ten days in Kabul. I flew to Herat on a PRT Air flight. PRT Air had been set up since I last departed the country in December 2003. It consisted of no less than one and no more than three twin engine Beechcraft piloted by South Africans. Personnel traveling to and from provincial reconstruction teams had first priority to fly on PRT Air, but it was also available to military and other civilian personnel on a space available basis. PRT Air addressed, in part, one of the biggest problems we faced earlier: how to move about the country. But for a few months, it was notoriously unreliable as the contractor sought to resolve various maintenance issues.

We had just taken off when the October 8, 2005 earthquake struck northern Pakistan. We never felt a tremor.

Upon my arrival in Herat, the PRT USAID officer, Kim Pease, met me at the tarmac. She handed me the keys to the U.S. quarters on the PRT. At the time, she was the only U.S. civilian at the PRT. My predecessor Tom Hushek had departed months earlier. Kim was leaving on the same PRT Air flight for a week of work in a neighboring province. We just passed each other on the tarmac. The Italian soldiers picked up my gear and we went into town to the PRT.

Q: The Italians?

COHEN: In April 2005, five months earlier, the Herat Provincial Reconstruction Team had been turned over by the U.S. to Italian control. The Herat PRT was one of the first set up. Herat is an important city in western Afghanistan, commercially buoyant and the port of entry for much of Afghanistan's imports. The Italians were new in the PRT business. Apparently, during the turnover process some bad blood had arisen between the Italians and the Americans. I detected some fallout. But the Italian soldiers were nothing but pleasant to me.

The PRT was located in the center of the Herat city, in a walled compound whose contours followed the property lines of houses procured for the PRT. The properties were sutured together into one facility. The neighborhood consisted of houses and apartment buildings. In the compound center, a hardtop parade ground served as the PRT's central open area. On the small cement pitch, Italian soldiers played football (soccer) every Friday afternoon. Seven inter-connected townhouses stood on the south side of the open ground. A rich Herati had constructed the interconnected townhouses for his sons. The mess hall and kitchen occupied the entire basement level. I suppose the patriarch intended his family would dine together. Officers and enlisted men lived in separate quarters. The U.S. apartment was at the west end of the seven townhouse complex on the second floor. The previous U.S. commander, State Department diplomat, and USAID representative had shared the apartment. After the turnover, we kept it. Below the U.S. apartment on the first floor were billeted enlisted men and women. They shared a bathroom. It was a "family" atmosphere.

It was ideal. I rolled out of bed and went downstairs to the mess hall for breakfast. The cuisine at the mess hall was Italian.

Q: Oh, how sad.

COHEN: Terrible. After tolerating embassy food service or the unchanging greasy KBR (Kellogg Brown and Root, a Halliburton company) food found at a U.S. military base, this was a pleasant turn. For quality food, I lucked out with both Bamiyan and Herat.

Q: When you say KBR?

COHEN: Kellogg Brown and Root had the service contract for U.S. military mess halls, the DIFACs. The food was typically appealing for American pallets: fried chicken, burgers, macaroni and cheese, soft drinks. At every American base, the cuisine was identical and predictable, and not necessarily healthy. At the Italian PRT, wine was available as was cold beer. Breakfast was typically continental and less exciting: croissants, cereal, fruit, and yogurt. Coffee was okay. The PRT did not serve bacon, scrambled eggs, pancakes, or grits. Lunches and dinners were generally tasty, and grilled peppers were always available. I believe there was one Afghan kitchen cook whose sole duty was to grill the peppers. The main dinner platter often included a fish or meat dish. Always, at least two and usually three pastas were offered - never just one.

When I arrived, I was advised to dine only with the Italian officers at their table. I often did, but not always. If there was a seat available for dinner, I joined the officers, usually including the commander and/or the deputy commander. Most officers spoke English, some spoke it fairly well.

Just as in Bamiyan, at the Herat PRT a minute contingent of American military still remained from the American presence. In Herat, it consisted of a US Army major, Major Tony Oliver from Oregon, Captain Hanes from Kentucky, and a couple of enlisted men. We usually ate together.

Major Oliver served as advisor and mentor to the commander of the Sixth Brigade of the Afghan Border Police (ABP). The Sixth Brigade headquarters was about fifteen kilometers west of the city on the road to the Iranian border. Tony sought to build the brigade's capability and especially the leadership skills of Colonel Mohammad Ayoub, the commander. Despite the importance of his mission, the major received meager support. As ISAF forces gradually backfilled U.S. troops, U.S. military authorities in Bagram and Kabul intentionally neglected western Afghanistan. Major Oliver did not have sufficient budget to sustain the border police, but he tried mightily. It was a constant frustration for him. I will get into that later.

Captain Hanes and the two enlisted men were remnants of what had been the PRT's CERP program (Commanders Emergency Response Program). CERP was designed to get humanitarian relief support and reconstruction funds out the door quickly. The Herat CERP program consisted of school construction, bore wells, retaining walls, etc. In some ways the CERP program paralleled the USAID effort. When the transfer of authority (TOA) from the U.S. to Italy occurred, the CERP program was being phased out. But it took awhile for the pipeline to clear. The leftover U.S. soldiers monitored the pipeline. It took about ten months from the time of the TOA until the pipeline of CERP reconstruction projects was fully completed. Kim Pease, the USAID representative, was a contractor. She had served at the PRT during the American presence and continued managing the huge USAID program.

In the apartment, Kim and I each had a bedroom. Since the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) representative departed months earlier, we used the vacant room for guests. By the standards of PRTs throughout the country, we probably enjoyed the best living conditions. Compared to the hooch in Bamiyan - shared with five other Americans with the latrines 30 meters away - the Herat PRT was luxurious. We shared a bathroom, a living area, a small kitchen with refrigerator and washing machine. I do not believe any other PRTer lived anywhere near as nicely as we did.

Kim advised me right off the bat to keep the apartment off limits to Italians. We needed our own space, she argued. Kim never completely trusted some of the Italian soldiers. An Afghan came in daily to do some janitorial stuff. The apartment was our private space. The current PRTer (May 2008), Palmer Roselli, still occupies it.

I will continue with a description of the PRT. In a three floor building near the main gate, Kim and I had our office area. The ground floor of the building served as a conference room for the Italians. On the first floor, the State Department and USAID representatives shared a conference room with about a dozen chairs in various states of repair. On the second floor, the Italian military assistance staff, including Afghan engineers, had their offices. The three floor building was perhaps 150 meters from my apartment door, a short commute! My office overlooked the interior compound and the motor pool. Kim's office faced the street. I had a desk, storage cabinets, and a laptop computer. Kim and I utilized a small kitchen. The Afghan handyman and janitor prepared chai. When Afghan guests came by, we served chai and kishmish (dried raisins and nuts). In Kim's little office, spread sheets on the walls listed the myriad USAID projects in her area of responsibility.

In a similar building next door, the Italian civilians had their offices and living quarters. The Italian Foreign Ministry-led development assistance team worked parallel to, although not necessarily in coordination with the military civil development team upstairs from us. Ambassador Carlo Ungaro, a retired diplomat, served as the Foreign Ministry advisor to the PRT. In September 2006 he married an American, Marion Douglas, in a ceremony at St. John's church next to Lafayette Square in D.C. The Italian military did not pay much attention to the work done by the civilian arm of the PRT. Their attitude towards the non-uniformed Italian personnel was exceedingly patronizing. This lack of cooperation, I believe, worked to the detriment of the entire Italian program. With more military cooperation, the civilian side complained, it could achieve much more development programming.

In the motor pool just behind our building parking was tight. I drove a Toyota Land Cruiser provided by the embassy. Kim utilized an identical Land Cruiser. Both were shipyard gray and had tall front end radio antennas attached to the front bumpers. The Italians drove white Toyota Land Cruisers, Prados, with little Italian flags on the front fender and the emblem of the Italian PRT on the doors. The Italians wanted Afghans to know they were Italian, and not American. It was a very naï¿½ve belief. The Afghans, initially, had no clue about Italy, except that the soldiers were not as friendly or supportive as the Americans had been. I'll get to that later.

The PRT utilized Afghan staff. A young friendly man, Ali, served as the PRT receptionist. The PRT employed about half a dozen interpreters, all left over from the American presence. The interpreters shared a room office which really doubled as a lounge. None of the staff actually belonged to me. Until my last month in Herat I had no FSNs. If I required the services of an interpreter, I requested one in advance from the Italian military upstairs. All the Afghan staff liked the Americans and bemoaned the PRT's turnover to Italy.

Since the PRT was a military base, procedures needed to be followed. When I left the base my first week in Herat, the Italians would not permit me behind the wheel of the Land Cruiser. They insisted I be a passenger. However, after a week, there was a sudden change of policy. The commander informed me that the PRT could no longer drive USG vehicles, ostensibly because of liability issues. To me, that was no problem. I trusted my driving skills and common sense over those of some 19 year old private who learned how to drive on the streets of Napoli! The Italians continued to provide me an escort. By driving my vehicle, I freed up one of the soldiers to hold a weapon, a shooter. When I left the compound by vehicle, the Italians provided me with two soldiers in my vehicle and two soldiers in a chase vehicle, one of the white Toyota Prados.

The process for departing the compound was straightforward. By the afternoon the day before I wanted to drive off the PRT, I had to submit a written request form to the PRT's tactical operations center (TOC). I informed the TOC of my mission, where and when I would be going, and when I would be coming back. If I had a meeting with the governor at 10:00 a.m., I left the compound at 9:45. I would meet with the governor and perhaps have another meeting or two, then return to the PRT. The Italians were always very accommodating about providing me with an escort. The Italians figured out that because I asked for vehicle support every day, it would be better just to give me a dedicated escort. I had little difficulty getting out of the compound. Kim who did not drive had constant headaches getting out of the PRT in her vehicle.

The Italians constantly rotated their soldiers. Enlisted men rarely stayed longer than four months before they rotated out, a very short deployment. The officers stayed slightly longer because of the need for overlaps. Meanwhile, the civilians remained but did take frequent vacations in Italy. During my tenure, I got to know four PRT commanders and two regional area command generals (responsible for the four western provinces of the country.)

Q: What were you doing?

COHEN: First, I served as the eyes and ears of the embassy. I wrote reports and cables although I considered this a secondary responsibility. "Think strategically and provide guidance to the mission." That was my personal motto left over from my experience in Bamiyan.

Capacity and institution building were vital elements of the job. I worked closely with USAID, the NGOs, UNAMA, and others, to foster better governance among Afghan institutions. With local governmental authorities, I subtly mentored my interlocutors. I occasionally mediated disputes that usually included the government as one of the parties. Dispute resolution was a factor in so much of what we did. Of course, I served as the liaison with the Italian PRT. At an American PRT, serving as a liaison with the PRT commander is less of an issue. "Diplomacy" with U.S. military leadership was relatively straightforward. But when dealing with a PRT run by another country, another level of diplomatic complexity must be addressed. My role included being a diplomat to the Italian PRT, in addition to the Afghans. Having lived with the Kiwis in Bamiyan, perhaps I was better prepared than most to go on to a non-American PRT.

Q: What were the Italians up to? What was their job?

COHEN: The Italians were new at the PRT business. They arrived in Herat with preconceived notions about their reputation, their ability to improve on the American methods, and their overall mission. For the Government of Italy, delivering development assistance in an Italian manner was a priority. A non-aggressive security posture followed. During my initial period at the PRT, the Italian assistance program was just getting started. It takes time to build capacity for delivering reconstruction projects and development services. A budget may exist. However, a cadre of engineers, contractors, and cohorts are also required. Projects must be identified and prioritized. As USAID officers know well, development work is neither simple nor instantaneous. The Italian PRT was inaugurated in the spring of 2005. When I arrived in October, the assistance program was just beginning to get solid footing. For example, some schools had been constructed. However, the program was slow in forming and in size it was miniscule compared to what Kim already had on her USAID plate. But, over time the PRT expanded its expertise.

The PRT's other primary mission was to provide security. Here the Italians fell down a bit. Security takes many forms. At most American PRTs, the security posture is heavy - think Humvees. Most U.S. PRTs are located in Afghanistan's more unstable, insecure areas, particularly in the southeast. In Herat, an urban environment with a friendly population, that made no sense. Instead, security depends on getting close to the people, to businesses, to residents, without heavy vehicles and brute force. Driving heavy in the city just did not work well and it alienated the people.

The U.S. PRT in Herat had conducted foot patrols. To me that was an excellent tactic. The Italians in their Land Cruisers - not Humvees or armored vehicles which might have been understandable - seemed to the locals to be afraid of the environment. The PRT seemed cautious in projecting security. Its vehicular patrolling was conducted within a tight driving radius from the PRT. For many months, perhaps a year, the PRT did not allow its soldiers to overnight outside the compound. When the Americans ran the PRT, they went out for days at a time to the far corners of Herat province. They slept in the villages and got to know the people. The Italians always returned to the PRT by 5:00 p.m. Thus, they could not go far.

Herat, unlike most of Afghanistan, is a city with much hardtop. However, outside the city and off the main highway arteries the province is laced with washed out gravel and rutted dirt trails. To get out, you have to commit to time and rugged driving. Towards the end of my tour, the Italians extended their patrolling and began to go out for more than one day. The decision by the PRT commander was commendable. Also, I understand that the Government of Italy is risk adverse to any casualties. To accomplish their mission, the Italians had to extend the radius of their presence.

When it came to patrolling, there was no comparison with the Kiwis who often sent patrols out into the Hindu Kush for two weeks or longer. From Bamiyan the Kiwis patrolled in Waras, Panjao, and even Dai Kundi in northern Uruzghan Province. (Dai Kundi eventually became a separate province.) Not too far as the crow flies but as far as the moon by vehicle, especially in winter. If the mountain passes were closed by snow, the Kiwis drove three or four days just to reach these areas via Kabul! These were mega-trips. I took only a couple of short trips with the Kiwis. The average vehicle speed was sluggish on the mountain roads. Once reaching a safe house, the Kiwis remained there. The Kiwis soldiers met with the local authorities, the villagers. They provided assistance and mediated disputes. That concept of extended security presence had not really sunk in yet with the Italians. They had to learn on their own.

And for some reason, the Italian officers got it into their heads that the Afghans would like them simply because everyone likes Italians - and that they were not Americans. This thinking was backward and shortsighted. The Americans in stationed in Herat had been well-liked by the Afghans, in part, because the Americans were not afraid to mingle with them. The Italians seemed so fearful. The Afghans can literally smell fear. They have no respect for it, and, thus, had little use, initially, for the Italians. This changed gradually. But it was Italian behavior which had to adjust, not Afghan.

Q: Was this a carryover...?

COHEN: Most Afghans received little or no formal education, especially the Afghan generation of the late 1970s through 2001. During Soviet rule, some academic institutions existed. But not institutionalized education. Most Afghans did not know what Italy was; they did not know what Europe was! Most Afghans had never seen a globe or a map of the world. In my experience Afghans really only understood four foreign nationalities. Everyone fell into one of these four mega-groups: Pakistanis, Persians - or Iranians, Afghans did not like the Iranians or Pakistanis, but I suspect Pakistanis were a bit lower on the scalRussians whom the Afghans hated, and Americans. The least amount of hatred was saved for the Americans. A Brit or Frenchman or Italian fell into the American category. Most Afghans could not differentiate between an Italian and an American. Was Italy a province of America? To them, Italians were white and Christian, just like the Americans. Over time the Afghans learned to differentiate. But initially, this was all new and beyond their comprehension. The Italians did not grasp this, nor I think did the Spaniards. The Spaniards operated the PRT in Qal-e Nau, Baghdis Province.

Q: I want to take you back now to my initial question. They are out there and learning what?

COHEN: Gradually, the Italian PRT learned to work with various Afghan authorities, the mullahs, the local shuras or councils. The Americans were not uncomfortable sitting with the Afghans and listening to them. The Kiwis understood this very well as did the Brits. It took a while for the Italians to get it. They needed to spend time in villages. As I explained, the Italian PRT initially conducted only presence patrols around Herat city and along the main roads. They did not really provide security.

As the Italian assistance mission was beefed up and the development people became more proficient, the PRT combined development with security. For example, they extended their reach to villages to evaluate assistance projects. A PRT cannot separate security from the other aspects of the mission. Security goes hand in hand with capacity building and development assistance. Assistancschools, bridges, and wells, etc. requires a stability platform, especially for NGOs. The NGOs provide an incredible amount of assistance throughout the country. But NGOs must feel safe to enter into those areas that most need help.

Q: The Italians go to the villages and speak with the local people. What are they doing? Are they looking projects or how things have been working?

COHEN: Initially, the PRT mission was "familiarization" with the Herat environment. This took some time. Because of the short deployment rotations, the PRT essentially relearned everything over and over every few months. On his first day in command, May 2006, I urged Colonel Zambuco to get to know the PRT's neighbors. Safety and security depended on their support; the neighbors were suspicious of the PRT and unhappy with the enhanced threat the PRT brought. I recommended that the Italian soldiers get out of the vehicles and walk. The Americans, I pointed out, had foot patrols. You can stop, talk, and drink chai with the Afghan men. The colonel learned quickly and worked to build stronger ties with the community. At one event, he invited the locals to come to the PRT for pizza. I wish I could say pizza and beer, but we're talking about Afghanistan.

Q: The other part of the equation is the bad guys. What was happening around you?

COHEN: Before I get to that, let me add a bit more about Kim Pease, the USAID representative. She had a very difficult time with the Italians. Whereas I drove, Kim could or would not drive. She had a difficult time reaching many projects she was handling throughout the province. Kim managed millions of dollars in assistance projects. She needed to monitor how this money was being spent. She depended on the Italians for movement. Most of my mission was within Herat city. I worked with provincial authorities, the university, etc. Most of Kim's work was beyond the city limits, usually in remote areas. The Italians were reluctant to provide her with transportation. Kim became extremely frustrated. The Americans had provided her much greater mobility.

Q: Yes. What was happening outside the compound as far as bad guys?

COHEN: From the security perspective Herat was considered more benign than much of the rest of the country. The Taliban had been routed out of Herat and out of western Afghanistan in 2001. Ismael Khan (IK), the local warlord, had run Herat before and after the Taliban. I will describe IK in a second. Herat was an ethnic mix of Tajiks, Hazara, Turkmens, Iranians, as well as Pashtuns who were a sizable minority. Compared with other regions, Herat's security posture was favorable. As time went by, however, Herat began to suffer from increased suicide bombings and other attacks. Plus, the political scene contributed to increased kidnappings and other criminal activities. Security deteriorated over the year that I was there.

In 2005 the United States pulled its soldiers from western Afghanistan, except for one PRT in Farah, the next province south. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) provided the backfill. Unfortunately, the introduction of ISAF initially left a void. The U.S. had provided millions of dollars in development assistance. The pipeline of projects required constant refilling since the development need was so desperate. The U.S. had been doing a good job; then, it seemed to the locals we just walked away. The USG assumed the Italians, the Spaniards, and others would fill the void. Over time, they likely will. But they could not fill the entire gap.

The U.S. departed precipitously from the north and the west in order to focus on the south and east. The void made it easier for the Taliban and other criminal elements, drug lords, former militia commanders, to slip back ands reassert their power and influence. In our lingo for the short-sightedness, we referred to the mission as "Operation Not Iraq."

IK, Ismael Khan, led the mujahideen in Herat, first against the Soviets, then against the Taliban. He and his Jamiat Islami party owned Herat, especially the customs house. As Herat's governor on and off until 2004, he was a kind of benevolent dictator, a Mussolini-type autocrat. That summer in a dispute with another warlord from the Shindand area of the province, Amanullah Khan, green on green fighting took place. IK's son was killed. President Karzai pulled IK out of Herat and gave him a ministry in Kabul.

IK ran Herat as his own fiefdom. The Herat customs house directed its revenue through him and he used a portion of the money to develop Herat. Since most of Afghanistan's customs revenue is collected at the Herat customs house, this was a large chunk of change. IK worked with the Iranians who extended a power line to Herat. While most of Afghanistan lacked electricity, Herat at night was lit up. When Karzai pulled IK back to Kabul, his minions still controlled Herat. From a distance IK sought to pull the province's strings. Meanwhile, in 2005 Karzai appointed Sayed Hussein Anwari, a Hazara from eastern Afghanistan who had been Minister of Agriculture, to be governor. The central government was trying to assert authority in Herat. Although there was a USAID customs reform effort at the customs house, some heads there needed to be rolled. The systematic corruption could not be rooted out easily. Eventually, the minister of finance forced out the incumbent customs director, an IK holdover. Although the new Kabul-appointed customs leadership was not much better, at least more revenue started to flow into Kabul's dry coffers.

Ismael Khan and his people continued to cause trouble in Herat. His motive, I suspect, was to spark a popular call for IK's return to the province. I sensed IK was feeling the pinch of his lost customs revenue since the reform effort got going in earnest in early 2006. Things came to a head in February 2006. IK henchmen sparked a riot during the Shia holy day of Ashura, the 10th day of the month of Muharram, commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammad. The events were premeditated. IK's Jamiat sub-commanders launched attacks on Herat's Shia, especially Hazara. IK, I suppose, planned to highlight Governor Anwari's "inept" leadership, forcing President Karzai's hand. IK would return with accolades to again lead Herat. Pretty simple and it almost worked. Karzai, perhaps foolishly, perhaps naively, or perhaps even shrewdly, sent IK to Herat to mediate he conflict. It appeared Karzai was hanging Anwari out to dry. But popular support for IK's return did not materialize. The riots subsided, since there was no real underlying cause. Sectarian violence had been rare in Herat, and after a couple of weeks the city returned to normaexcept for the wounded and slain After one week in the city, IK returned to Kabul. Many who predicted Governor Anwari's imminent departure from office were wrong. He is still in office even now (May 2008). I last saw him in October 2007.

IK's grab for total power in Herat was unsuccessful. However, he remains extremely influential in the city. A warlord of his stature cannot be brought to earth by the governor or anyone else at the provincial level. President Karzai is the only person who can take him down, and so far he has been unwilling to do so. During the difficulties Karzai reportedly asked Ambassador Neumann to deal with IK. The Ambassador correctly told the president that IK was an Afghan issue, not ours. Until warlords like IK are cauterized from Afghan society, the problems they cause will continue to fester. Then there is the issue of poppy cultivation. Especially in rural areas, the Taliban are filling the governing vacuum. This keeps the cauldron boiling.

Herat's complex situation was a challenge for the Italian PRT. In a sense, the Italians relied even more than me on the interpreters. I developed a broad range of contacts which helped me quite a bit. But the constant turnover of PRT personnel created a dependency on the interpreters and others.

Let me comment more about my relations with the Italians. The Americans at the PRT were not a part of the PRT leadership. I did not attend daily meetings; for the most part the Italian command did not want me around their internal workings - which were conducted in Italian in any case. Perhaps they thought I was assigned to the PRT to observe their operations. I understand this may have changed somewhat with my successors.

On the other hand, I enjoyed a very positive social relationship with all the Italians, soldiers and officers. I spoke freely and frankly with the commander and his staff. The ISAF Regional Coordinator for Western Afghanistan, RC-West, an Italian Brigadier General, had his headquarters within the PRT until spring 2006. The RC-West consisted of staff form various ISAF member countries: Spaniards, Lithuanians, Hungarians, as well as an American captain. As I said, the regional command was led by an Italian BG. In June 2006, the coordination function of RC-West transitioned to a commander function; RC-West became RAC-West for Regional Area Command-West. The RAC-West HQ shifted to the Spanish-led forward operating base (FOB) at Herat Airport. RC, later RAC- West, meetings were conducted in English.

Note the two separate entities: the PRT and the regional ISAF command. The regional area coordinator/commander was higher in rank than the PRT commander, a colonel. This created some friction between the two. On the whole, however, the bifurcated system worked as well as might be expected. The PRT focused on provincial issues, including security, development assistance and relations with local administration. The regional command took a broader view of things, although it did not ignore Herat specific trends. Note that there were PRTs in Qau-i-Nau (Baghdis Province - Spain), Chacharan (Ghor ProvincLithuania), and Farah (Farah ProvincUnited States).

You asked about security. The first major attack against the Italian PRT occurred on December 20, 2005. A suicide bomber attempted to ram a northbound convoy on the Ring Road just north from the airport. The explosion lightly wounded a couple of the Italian soldiers but destroyed the Land Cruiser in which they were traveling. Smart driving by the Italian soldier limited the injuries. At the time, I was just a couple of kilometers from the attack location, accompanied by the Herat Chamber of Commerce on a tour of the Herat Industrial Zone, right across the highway from the airport. I did not hear the explosion although the others in the group claimed they heard something. The Italian soldiers were fortunate, the suicide bomber was toast. Immediately, the PRT radioed my escort and ordered us into the Spanish-run Forward Operating Base at the airport. We reached there in minutes and remained in the compound for a couple of hours. In the meantime, the Italians dealt with the attack site. They feared another attack, although once the suicide bomber blew himself up, a second attack was unlikely. Finally, a convoy was organized to run back to the PRT in Herat proper.

I drove the third car in the five vehicle convoy. Because of fears that another suicide attack on the normal driving route on the Ring Road, the Italian officer in charge directed the convoy to a second road near the Marco Polo Bridge, a rarely utilized route over the Hari Rud River. There had been no rain in months. The dirt roads were inches deep in dust. The convoy commander wanted us to drive fast and close to each other. He believed such driving would prevent a suicide bomber from entering the convoy. It was a tactical blunder. Because of the high speed and the thick dust, the first vehicles on the dirt road raised an impenetrable wall. By the third vehiclme - the dust cloud left zero visibility. We're driving a curvy dirt road at high speed. It was a terrible driving risk, much greater than the possibility of an attack. The Italian soldier next to me did not have radio communications with the other vehicles. Finally, I said I had to stop to allow the dust cloud to dissipate. Good thing I did. When the dust cleared slightly, we were fifteen feet off the road heading straight through freshly made mud bricks towards a steep canal. Another second or two and we would have had a serious accident. The driver in the vehicle just behind me was not so cautious. A second later he slammed into my rear, destroying the spare tire on the rear rim. Damage to the front end of the Italian Land Cruiser was more serious.

I describe this incident as an example of panicked thinking and perhaps shock. Certainly, the suicide bombing was serious. Understandably, adrenalin was flowing. However, rushed behavior can compound the consequences. Had I launched into the canal or been more seriously rear-ended, the bad day could have been terribly worse. I realized this immediately, even before we left the Spanish FOB.

The next serious attack on the Italians occurred on April 8, 2006. It was about 8:40 in the morning. I was in my office which, as I said earlier, faces inside the PRT. Facing the front of the building next to my office was our conference. There was a loud boom which shook the building. In the conference the glass from the windows were smashed. A suicide bomber had tried to attack the PRT. He set himself off about 60 meters from my office. There were perhaps four fatalities, all Afghan, including a PRT guard and passing pedestrians. One man had been pushing a cart. A number of Afghan militia soldiers were contracted to protect the PRT from the outside. The compression from the explosion crushed the hour and minute hands on the clock in the conference room.

At the point where the suicide bomber went off, a large white marble house stood between the street and the PRT. The house had a tall, solid wall. In front of the house, a small guard shack that belonged to the PRT was completely leveled. Windows up and down the street were broken. Body parts were evident, even on the roof of our building. However, in his excitement the suicide bomber detonated himself somewhat prematurely. The main PRT entrance was at least another 70 meters further down the street. It was easy to mistake the small guard shack for the PRT one just ahead. One of the Italian civilians whose office did face the street suffered severe cuts on his arm and was evacuated to Italy.

This was certainly a major attack and it shook up the Italians. The PRT command immediately took steps to restrict traffic on the streets surrounding the PRT. Jersey barriers were placed to slow traffic. Additional car checks were set up at the ends of the blocks. It was a wake-up call.

Q: You suggested the Italian PRT thought that it might be less susceptible to attack because it was not American.

COHEN: There was that sense, yes.

If the December attack was not enough of a wake-up call, then April suicide bombing was. The homes along the street suffered damage. Residents were understandably both angry and bitter. Their resentment against the PRT boiled over. Some local residents sought to force the PRT to relocate. More than the PRT, provincial authorities nipped the effort quickly. The PRT commander at the time was not one of the best. The Italians tried to convince the residents that not only would the new security procedures reduce the likelihood of a similar attack, but that locals would not be unreasonably inconvenienced. The PRT leadership could no longer ignore the neighborhood in which the PRT was located. But still, there was little PRT effort to engage the locals in a traditional Afghan manner. The April attack was certainly significant. But it was only after the next suicide attack, which was not even directed at the Italians, when I believe the point was finally driven home.

The next suicide attack in Herat against the westerners occurred on Thursday, May 18, 2006. I will get to the incident in a moment. First, I will provide some context.

Just to the northeast of the airport, the Regional Police Training Center (RTC) managed by a Department of State contractor, DynCorp, served to train national police. From its exterior, the RTC looked like a maximum security penitentiary with high eight meter walls topped with razor wire. The RTC periodically received poorly launched rocket or mortar attacks. While not very accurate, the occasional attacks were more than a just nuisance. I suspected the attacks were condoned by the neighboring village. A dirt road to the RTC also served the local communities. RTC vehicles tore up and deeply rutted the dirt road. Millions of dollars had been invested in the RTC and its fancy up-armored vehicles, including a black stretch Humvee, affectionately called the "War Wagon" by RTC personnel. The War Wagon, which reputedly cost $350,000, was an emergency vehicle only, for use in evacuating the center when under attack. The airport, the logical point of embarkation in an emergency was just a mile away. Yet, not a dime was spent to improve the road. The locals were probably resentful and wanted to send a message. It exemplified the RTCs poor community relations.

DynCorp also trained the Afghan Border Police (ABP). Major Oliver whom I mentioned earlier, developed a strong mentoring relationship with the ABP Sixth Brigade commander Colonel Ayoub. By now, Major Oliver was gone. No one had yet replaced him. Instead, Kabul instructed DynCorp, without direct supervision, to train and mentor the border police at Islam Qala, the main border crossing point with Iran. From Herat proper, the border is a good ninety minute drive, closer to two hours with heavy vehicles. From the RTC, tack on an additional half hour. DynCorp trainers drove each day to Islam Qala in a convoy of up-armored Ford F-250s. They departed the RTC each morning at about the same time, drove the same route through Herat city, and returned to the RTC after a couple of inconclusive hours on the ground at the border. It was extremely poor security tradecraft and, I felt, accomplished almost nothing at the border.

Q: The border of what?

COHEN: Afghanistan and Iran. Islam Qala was the name of the border village. Commercial and pedestrian traffic crossed each way. Hundreds of trucks from Iran entered Afghanistan every day. The border police truly needed assistance. DynCorp was contracted to train them. But the ABP also urgently needed logistical support. And trainers who visited for only a couple of hours in the middle of the day were not much use.

Actually, Major Oliver and I had seen this problem coming. Seven months earlier, I urged the head of the Afghan Reconstruction Group (ARG) Ed Smith who also led the recently-established Border Management Initiative (BMI) that a small site a few kilometers from the border and across the main road from a police station be fixed up and used as a base or safe house for police trainers operating at the Islam Qala border. USAID had already refurbished two small buildings for the ministry of finance. The compound had three walls and two guard towers. The border police had never moved into the buildings. Instead, an "agreement" between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Refugees and Returnees (MoRR) allowed MoRR personnel to utilize the compound. The MoRR worked with UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) to assist Afghan returneeof which at this time there were almost none. It was a great deal for the MoRR officials stationed there. The post was overstaffed since they had hardly any work. Understandably, the MoRR people did not want to vacate. To use the compound for police trainers, the MoRR staff would have to relocate elsewhere and the compound fixed up to our security standards. I sought alternative MoRR space. I negotiated with the UN and MoRR. I even obtained a commitment from Ed Smith, the head of the Border Management Initiative, to contribute funds for renting alternative MoRR lodging. All came to naught.

DynCorp was not excited about the compound proposal. I admit it was an imperfect solution. But it was an inexpensive fix. The facility already belonged to the ministry of finance. A place to crash, a change in routine, could have provided flexibility for anyone working at the border. The Ministry of Refugees and Returnees staff could have relocated to a nearby building for little cost, perhaps a few thousand dollars. The border police post was across the road. Colonel Ayoub supported the effort.

In my view, good security depends on a few critical factors. The most important is to be unpredictable. Any way to change time and routes contributes to a better security posture. It sounds pretty simple. With almost no money, we could have then taken possession of the facility and turned it into a functioning safe house which would add the unpredictability element to those working at the border.

It did not work out that way. Instead DynCorp trainers drove every day to the border. Ultimately, they were targeted. A suicide bomber in a taxi waited for the three vehicle DynCorp convoy as it skirted around Herat. The taxi clipped the second vehicle and exploded next to the last. I was at the offices of the Provincial Council when the attack occurred, just after 9 a.m. One DynCorp trainer, Ronald Zimmerman, was killed; two others were injured, one seriously.

Where the attack occurred, the road was next to a hill. About fifty feet above the road just at the point of the suicide attack was the Thousand and One Nights Restaurant, frequented often by expats. As the targeted vehicle was burning - I am convinced this is what happened - the ammunition inside the vehicle cooked off. I believe the exploding ordnance echoed off the hill where the restaurant was. The convoy survivors claimed they heard small arms fire directed at them. However, an explosion like that also affects hearing. Panic can also set in. The DynCorp personnel started shooting uphill. They shot up the restaurant, fortunately no one was hit and damage to the structure was light. Restaurant staff told me later that they ran for cover.

DynCorp swore that they had been under small arms fire attack. When an attack occurs, I assume the first reaction is to fire back. I later interviewed the restaurant personnel and other witnesses. There was zero evidence of a follow-on attack after the suicide bomber. For example, no shell casings were found. I was convinced that just as in other highly publicized IED incidents out of Afghanistan and Iraq, this was a case of a stress-related, even panicked response. Fortunately, no one was hit by the DynCorp personnel. As I mentioned, the attack occurred in the morning.

Events then started unbeknownst to me. An embassy investigative team flew to Herat to investigate the attack. The FBI team consisting of two special agents and an assistant legal attachï¿½ was met by the U.S. military Quick Reaction Force (QRF) stationed at the Afghan National Army (ANA) training base, Camp Victory, located about ten kilometers south of the airport. Neither the FBI team nor the American command at Camp Victory notified provincial authorities, the Italian PRT, the regional (RAC-West) coordinator, or me that a site investigation was planned.

Late in the afternoon, the FBI team and the QRF reached and secured the attack site. The QRF cordoned off the road, the main highway around the city. The U.S. military QRF utilized Humvees with fifty caliber machine guns. A Humvee was placed at each end to seal the site. While common practice elsewhere in the country, security cordons such as this one were not the usual procedure in Herat.

Within fifteen minutes of setting up the roadblocks, an Afghan truck driver who worked for the municipality of Herat approached the cordon. With hand signals the U.S. soldiers ordered him to halt. The driver did not understand English. He panicked and tried to drive around the cordon. The soldiers plugged him full of bullets. He was killed immediately and his truck slid into a nearby channel. The FBI team contacted superiors in Kabul who gave permission for the team to "withdraw from the incident location."

About fifteen minutes later, I receive an urgent phone call from Yosefi, my Ministry of Foreign Affairs contact. Yosefi asked me to visit the governor immediately; he briefly explained that there had been a shooting and an Afghan was dead. Yosefi picked me up at the PRT and took me to the governor's residence. Governor Anwari was distraught and irate. I called the embassy and I learned about the investigative team for the first time. I called the commander at Camp Victory, responsible for the QRF. The team had yet to report ithe Humvee trip from the site of the shooting to the camp took the better part of an hour. At the PRT and at RC-West, ISAF regional headquarters, the Italians were livid that they had not been informed of the investigative team and the security cordon. The American commander at Camp Victory was later called on the carpet. He was responsible and failed to keep the appropriate authorities informed, but it was not totally his fault. The embassy failed to keep me or anyone else apprised of the plans. The FBI report on the incident whitewashed the entire episode.

Someone in the embassy, probably the Regional Security Officer (RSO), had sent the investigative team to Herat immediately after hearing of the suicide attack in the morning. No one in Herat other than the U.S. colonel at Camp Victory was informed. Without coordination with local authorities, including the PRT, the Americans violated "rules of engagement." Moreover, Heratis were not use to this type of cordon, common elsewhere in the country. Local Afghan police and the PRT easily could have supported the investigative mission. It was a bad scene and not unrepresentative of much that was going wrong in Afghanistan. Coincidently, that day the Italian PRT was having a change in command. For the new commander it was a real eye-opening experience. Later that evening, some locals set off explosions nearby. I believe a small bomb that had been placed near the Indian Consulate, perhaps two kilometers away. It was not an attack, but everyone was jittery that night. I discussed my thoughts on how to improve PRT security with the new commander.

The American investigative team departed for Kabul the next day on a military flight. They refused to say anything to me. Two hundred yards away from the hanger where they awaited their flight, the RTC DynCorp team was sending off their colleague who had been killed. A special plane had been sent to bring Ron's body back to Kabul. Once the planes departed, one with the body, the other with the FBI team, I was stuck with the compensation issue of the Afghan truck driver who was killed. The driver left a widow and twelve or thirteen children. Herat city authorities were extremely upset about the incident. The local press and the malcontents in the mosques spoke out viciously against the Americans that Friday.

Herat Mayor Alhaji M. Rafiq Mojaddadi was taking a lot of flak. The driver had worked for the municipality. The mayor was under terrific pressure to do something. In Afghan culture, compensation for an accidental killing is important. Honor is at stake. The U.S. military refused to get involved. I recommended to the embassy that compensation be arranged for the family. After extensive back and forth with the embassy, USAID authorized its local contractor, IOwhich was reluctant to get involved but had little choice - to disburse six thousand dollars to the family. Six weeks later, I handed the cash to the widow (in burka, so I have to assume it was the widow!) in the mayor's office. My synagogue in Arlington took up a collection of both clothing and cash. I presented the additional money to the widow a few months later. My successor, Van Ram, collected the clothing from the synagogue and he placed it in his household effects shipment, using his extra airfreight weight. He later distributed the clothing to the family.

The shooting of the truck driver completely overshadowed the earlier suicide attack on the DynCorp convoy and left the U.S. with a black eye. But the situation could have been far worse. If my position had been vacant or if the officer did not pay attention to the incident, we could have lost a lot more goodwill in Herat.

The U.S. is still viewed fairly favorably in western Afghanistan. But while the image of the United States is still somewhat positive, it is shaky. Small incidents have tremendous ramifications. Bad decision-making, particularly in security practice, by military, by contractors or whomever, can undo all the good that we do with our development assistance.

During the following weeks, I attempted to reverse the negative publicity from the incident. Kim who departed Herat a few months earlier had numerous finished projects that had not yet been dedicated. In collaboration with Herati provincial authorities and IOM, USAID's contracting agent in Herat, I helped preside over the ribbon-cutting of new schools and other facilities. These ceremonies demonstrated that the U.S. cared about Afghanistan's development.

Q: We are going through a bad period now because the actions of private security firms, Blackwater being the major one, but there are others, in Iraq-

COHEN: Blackwater had a presence at the Regional Police Training Center (RTC), operated by DynCorp. A small contingent of Blackwater personnel provided advanced, paramilitary-type training to the border police: how to set up a perimeter, cordon a street, exit vehicles quickly, etc. The Blackwater trainers, many of whom had been Special Forces, taught techniques that might save police lives in Afghanistan. They also provided their trainees with basic equipment: webbing, vests, belts and boots. Too bad the training only lasted a few weeks.

Afghan policemen do not have the same functions as police in our country. Whether border police or regular police, all Afghan police personnel require extraordinary, even paramilitary skills to survive. Unfortunately, the police trainees remained at the RTC just eighteen days, barely enough time to become acclimated to the RTC culture. A cursory two or three week training regime is not sufficient. The majority of DynCorp personnel were themselves police officers from places like Alabama or Texas. Their skill sets were geared towards the conduct of police work in the United States. I questioned whether these skills were relevant to the unique circumstances of Afghanistan. The trainers were probably quite expert in catching speeders and writing traffic tickets. But had they never been in a situation where their lives were in constant jeopardy, where they were at risk from the most innocuous by-stander? Had they gone up against armed insurgents like the Taliban or vicious drug lords and warlords? Were they constantly outgunned by the bad guys? Were they paid less than peanuts like Afghan police? So I found the DynCorp training effort inadequate. The State Department touted how many Afghan policemen were being trained, in the many thousands. But the training was terribly cursory and delivered by trainers who, in my opinion, really did not know what they were doing.

Typically, a rural policeman arrived at the RTC wearing sandals and his normal street clothes. The prospective trainee looked the same when he graduated eighteen days later - no uniform and wearing his sandals. DynCorp argued, disingenuously I felt, that provisions for the police trainees were the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior. The ministry allegedly had a warehouse full of police equipment and uniforms that donor governments, including the U.S., gave them. These items should have been allotted to the policemen. True enough. However, if a police trainee is wearing neither boots nor a uniform nor even a belt, how well can he be trained? What kind of pride is he going to possess in being a policeman? It was the responsibility of the trainers, in this case DynCorp which received hundreds of millions of dollars from its USG contract, to obtain those items by whatever means and provide them to their trainees.

Right about the time when this was happening, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, visited Herat. I escorted him to the RTC. He saw the situation for himself and later mentioned it to President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. Eventually, uniforms and equipment were juggled loose from the ministry warehouse. But DynCorp really should have cared about the situation without being pushed. The company wanted to demonstrate the rising numbers of trainees being channeled through the RTCs throughout the country. It seemed to care less about the caliber of the police. In the case of Blackwater, the trainers tried more diligently to prepare the police trainees for whatever encounters might be faced.

Q: Let us talk about influence of Iran during the time you were there.

COHEN: Iran is the primary conduit for commerce into Afghanistan. Much of Afghanistan's drug trafficking exits the country via Iran. Cheap Iranian and third country goods flood Afghanistan. Import tariffs provide a major share of the GOA's revenue. Customs revenue collected by the Herat customs house was vital for government operations. It was essential this revenue reach central government hands and not the pockets of the local warlorin this case, Ismael Khan. Hundreds of Afghans waited each day in front of the Iranian consulate. Many sought jobs in Iran which for Afghans was an economic magnet. The Iranian consul general was a "big man on campus," literally and figuratively, in Herat. The Government of Iran funded numerous development projects in Herat province, including the highway between the border and Herat city, about 120 kilometers of hardtop. Many claimed it was the best hardtop road in the country. The Iranians constructed schools. When I was there, a high capacity fiber optic line from Meshed, Iran to Herat was inaugurated. Iran put a lot of attention and resources into western Afghanistan. Despite the significant development assistance coming from Tehran, there generally was no love lost between most Afghans and Iranians.

The GOI was not being totally altruistic. It perceived payback. Afghanistan was a place to dump Iranian products that had no other market outlets. Items that could not be sold on the world market or even sold in Iran could be dumped in Afghanistan. I mentioned chicken imports earlier. Frozen poultry that had thawed, was expired, or had been sourced in third countries suffering from avian influenza entered Afghanistan unimpeded and until about 2006, usually uninspected. This laissez faire commercial system extended to all kinds of products. To its credit, and with the assistance of the American businessman I mentioned earlier, the health inspection service of the Ministry of Agriculture and Afghan Customs improved inspection techniques and reduced significantly the import of unhealthy food products.

Except for crude oil, carpets, pistachios, saffron, and a few other items, Iran produces few products that are globally competitive. Afghanistan was a captive market. From this perspective, commercial involvement in Afghanistan was in Iran's national interest. And a more prosperous Afghanistan that could purchase Iranian goods was also in Iran's national interest. On the flip side, the drug trade affected Iran in a deeply negative fashion. Iran has a huge drug problem with, reportedly, over a million drug addicts already. Iran is a very significant conduit for opium into Europe.

Q: With opium was Iran seeking its payoff?

COHEN: I suspect there was a tremendous amount of graft and corruption among Iranian officials, especially along the border. The money was big. Iranian border guards were paid to turn their heads and allow traffickers to come through. On the Afghan side, Colonel Ayoub, commander of the Sixth Brigade Border Police based in Herat, knew his poorly-paid men were susceptible to graft. He sought to enforce some integrity, although we could never be 100 percent sure about his own integrity. I enjoyed a very close relationship Colonel, later General Ayoub. The drug traffickers were well armed and flush with cash. The border police were out-gunned and often over-matched by the drug traffickers. This was probably not quite the case on the Iranian side of the border. Still, with so much money, bribery was easy. Given its own drug problem, Iran needs to halt the flow of drugs. Even the ayatollahs must understand that opium is not good for their people. General Ayoub was eventually killed in a daring December 2006 attack at the bridge over the Hari Rud, most likely by those involved in the drug trade.

Iran had a strong political interest in Afghanistan. The GOI did not mind tweaking the United States by keeping the pot boiling. I believe Iran prefers that Afghanistan not be completely stabilized. They are probably happy that the U.S. presence in western Afghanistan has been greatly reduced. Except for Afghan National Army (ANA) trainers, the PRT in Farah, and small Special Forces units, the U.S. military had withdrawn from western Afghanistan by mid-2005. U.S. elements in the west were absolutely minimal. Everything had been turned over to ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), specifically the Spanish, the Italians, and the Lithuanians. There was a political interest as well. Iran wanted a friendly governor. Under Ismael Khan, Herat's governor on and off until 2004, a cozy relationship existed with Iran. Even after IK became minister of energy and water, he likely retained his ties with Iran. In exchange, Iran provided significant development assistance into Herat, including electricity transmission lines. Herat was lit with, mostly, Iranian electricity. Some power came from Turkmenistan.

The Afghan-Iranian relationship is almost incestuous. Afghans tend not to like Iranians who are perceived as over-bearing. Afghan citizens were being mistreated in Iran. Hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees still remained in Iran. Periodically, Iran forced them to leave. Afghans in Iran were perceived not unlike Hispanic wetbacks in the United States. They did the menial labor for low wages.

I did not have much to do with the Iranians, of course. I was preempted from doing so. The first time I met the Iranian consul general was an accident. I had been invited to an Iftar (post-Ramadan) dinner at a Herat guest house. When I arrived, I was asked to sit on the pillows at the place of honor near the governor. The man sitting next to me was the Iranian consul general. That made for an awkward situation. Ambassador Ungaro, the Italian MFA representative sitting across from us almost split a gut.

I suspect the Iranians had a good spy network in Herat. I just assumed they could listen to anything I said or wrote. I did not care. When I was reporting back to the embassy and used my Hotmail or Yahoo email accounts, much that I wrote was subtly intended for them. I felt that it did not matter what they heard or saw by that time. They were just everywhere.

When Heratis spoke with me about Iran, they blamed everything under the sun on Iranian machinations. Afghans themselves rarely took responsibility for their own issues or problems. Others had to be blamed. In conversations with me, the boogeyman was always Iran. When Afghans spoke with Iranians, I suppose the reverse occurred.

I will mention Turkmenistan, Afghanistan's northern neighbor. Even though Turkmenistan and Afghanistan share a long border, there is little commerce between the two countries. Turkmenistan had been a part of the former Soviet Union, part of the problem in the eyes of most Afghans. During the decades of turmoil, Afghans did not seek refuge in Turkmenistan, USSR. Although Turkmen electricity flowed into western Afghanistan, there was little interaction between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. At the border, trucks crossed infrequently. At the train railhead, few trains came over. Scrap metal from Central Asia transited Afghanistan on its way to Pakistan. Unlike Iran, there was no real cross border trade and no cross border pedestrian traffic.

At the end of 2005 I visited Turkmenistan. To enter Turkmenistan, I walked about a kilometer and a half from the gate at the border proper to the main Turkmen border station. One clearly entered the communist world, even more severe than Uzbekistan which I had visited in November 2003. After two days in Merv, possibly the world's largest city in the twelfth century but only a Soviet-style eye-sore in the twenty-first, I could not wait to get out. Everywhere, Turkmenbashi's (Turkmenistan's Communist dictator Saparmurat Niyazov) visage gazed down from murals, statues, paintings, the television, and even the currency. His was a true cult of personality until his death in December 2006. I never felt welcomed in the city. When I reached the Afghan gate, I was warmly welcomed by the Afghan border guards. Their first question to me: green or black, as in green or black chai? Imagine being relieved to be BACK in Afghanistan!

There was a Turkmen consul in Herat. In fact, the diplomatic community consisted of the Iranians, the Turkmens, the Pakistani and Indian consul generals, Ambassador Ungaro at the Italian PRT, and me. The Afghan foreign ministry had a representative office. Both the Indian and the Pakistani consul generals were very friendly. There was no evident rivalry or tension between the two. We had frequent dinners together. It was our own diplomatic corps. The foreign ministry representative office in Herat performed liaison and consular services for us. Their role seemed almost to be advisory.

Q: What about the poppy business?

COHEN: Most poppy that transited the western region was grown elsewhere. Western Afghanistan is not Afghanistan's major poppy producing region. But it was easy for poppy grown in Helmand province and elsewhere to reach Herat. Like the rest of the country, Herat benefited from the trafficking. To traffic opium out of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran are essential. Trucks entered Afghanistan at Islam Qala, the main border station, filled to the brim with all kinds of items. The trucks left emptunless opium was hidden inside. Used vehicles, mostly cheap East Asian models and Toyota Corollas, flooded across the border and sat in huge car lots just to the west of towbefore reaching the Herat customs house. Opium paid for these imports. I considered this flood of imported vehicles and other luxury items the money laundering from opium.

For Afghan farmers, cultivation of poppy was a no brainer. No other crop provided the rate of return that poppy did. Attempts by the NGOs, funded by USAID and others, to come up with alternative livelihoods - saffron was a big one being toutemet with mixed success. Vegetable growing projects were launched. Simple food processing projects such as canning tomatoes were established. No commodity compared to poppy for ease of cultivation. Few products had the guaranteed market that poppy had. From the farmers' point of view, poppy may have had large risk due to international eradication efforts. But the crop provided a real cash return. Also, drug lords and Taliban commanders who controlled rural areas frequently ordered farmers to grow poppy. The threat was real. Even if a farmer preferred not to defy the government edict against poppy cultivation, he was under tremendous pressure to grow poppy because of this intimidation.

I feel our drug strategy is backwards. We try to conduct a "bottom up" approach by destroying poppy fields. This effort alienates rural communities and gives them incentive to provide sanctuary for Taliban elements. If the government destroyed your poppy field, would not you be bitter about it? Perhaps you would not be able to feed your family that winter. A Taliban representative comes along and offers the farmer money to provide sanctuary for some fighters or put an IED (improvised explosive device) out on the road or take a potshot at a policeman. The money provided by the Taliban is far greater than revenue earned from any other source. It becomes a matter of economics. Addressing this problem from below does not work. It must be addressed from the top. We ought to target the drug lords and corrupt politicians. Go after the laboratories, and finally the cultivators. Also, Afghanistan must get better control over its borders.

Until the end of 2005, no banking mechanism existed in Afghanistan, except for the hawala system. Opium flowed out of the country. How did the earnings come back? It could not really return in cash since (a) there was no real banking system, and (b) there was nothing significant to buy. Payment came back to Afghanistan in product. I stood at the border and watched truck after truck enter Afghanistan full of cheap goods, carpets, old vehicles - jalopies that are going to be resold in Afghanistan. Nothing left the country; the tractor trailer trucks departed empty. Nobody in the real world is providing cash credit to Afghans. No bank, factory, or trading company is providing credit to Afghan purchasers. Why is all the trade going one way? This is the ledger balance for the poppy. Rather than cash which does little good anyway because there is little to purchase, goods come back. That is the cycle. I believe this is the cycle that requires attention. It necessitates cooperation with the Iranian government. You cannot conduct drug eradication in Afghanistan without involving Iran, and I assume Pakistan. Follow the money. We spend millions of dollars to cut down poppy crops, which can be grown three months later in the same location. No one can patrol every field in Afghanistan. We alienate the farmers. Many are being ordered to grow poppy by local warlords and drug lords. The poppy crop has reached record levels. Our current strategy does not work and will not work as long as we take this tack. Moreover, Afghanistan's economic well being which we do not want to puncture depends on poppy.

Q: Is there anything to do to eradicate the drug trade?

COHEN: You cannot eradicate poppy completely. Afghanistan is a rugged place. There is no way to prevent poppy from being grown unless the incentives for cultivation have been eradicated. As long as the price is attractive, farmers will try to grow it. One method may be to reduce the price of poppy. If the farmer gets less for his poppy, that is a disincentive to cultivate it. Alternative livelihood crops make sense. Provide alternatives but do not force them down the throats of the farmers. Let the farmers make the right economic decisions. It makes no sense to continue destroying a crop that can be easily replanted. We do not want to piss off farmers who then turn around and lend support to the Taliban. Repurchase of poppy and destruction does create a moral hazard situation whereby farmers may prefer not to stop growing poppy and be subsidized. Ultimately, however, somehow poppy prices have to come down to levels comparable to other crops. Economic tools have to be employed to reduce poppy cultivation, not just force.

I have not given much thought to the methods of going after the money. I am not an expert. The answer, I suppose, must be both supply and demand driven. As Iran is discovering, to their chagrin, if opium is available and nothing is done on the demand side, demand will just keep rising.

Q: Did you have any role in the drug business?

COHEN: No, I did not. The anti-poppy program was run out of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) office in Kabul. USAID promoted alternative livelihoods programs. Various projects that promoted alternative crops had mixed success. Frankly, our engagement with poppy eradication could have put people like me in greater danger. Had PRTs engaged in drug eradication, PRT personnel would have risked becoming a target. PRTs should not make waves. PRTs have their hands full just dealing with local security issues, including the Taliban.

I understand the Taliban and drug lords often worked together or were one and the same. At least from the PRT perspective, as long as the rural population did not feel persecuted and development assistance continued to flow into the communities, there was a benign acceptance. If PRT personnel destroyed poppy, alienated Afghans could have made everything more difficult.

Q: Let us talk about Herat, religion and the mullahs. What was the role of mullahs?

COHEN: There are mullahs all over Afghanistan. Many so-called mullahs are no more mullahs than you or I. Often, a mullah was simply someone who called himself a mullah and was uneducated.

Q: We have such issues with preachers.

COHEN: Those who are not ordained. Note though that Mullahs have a significant role in Afghan society.

A Shiite-Sunni divide did exist. In Herat the sectarian divide was not as deep as the ethnic. Sunni and Shia generally lived peacefully as neighbors. Most Shia were Hazara, an ethnic group generally viewed unfavorably by other Afghans, especially the Sunni Pashtu. The Taliban, as I mentioned earlier, had persecuted the Hazara unmercifully. In Herat, animosity lay dormant. However, in February 2006 the hatreds surfaced during the Shia holiday of Ashura which commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad.

Q: This is when they beat themselves?

COHEN: That is correct. The 10th day of the Muharram is commemorated by the Shia. During Ashura, Shiite clerics led prayers and delivered sermons at Herat's main mosque.

I mentioned these riots earlier. On this particular Ashura, local hoodlums associated with Ismael Khan (IK) and his Jamiat Islami instigated anti-Shia attacks. At the time I was out of the country. IK's henchmen launched violent anti-Shia disturbances. Riots broke out throughout the city. Even the PRT was targeted by demonstrators. The violence was clearly premeditated. At least a dozen Heratis were killed, more were seriously hurt. Later, Shia representatives told me the hospital had turned away wounded Shia seeking treatment. I cannot confirm this allegation. I believe the disturbances were launched by IK loyalists, in part, in order to portray Governor Anwari, a Hazara and a Shiite, look weak. President Karzai then undercut the governor further. Apparently panicked by the disturbances, he instructed IK, his minister of water and energy, to go to Herat to mediate an end to the crisis. IK immediately flew to Herat where he was received by his many loyalists. He met the governor and other local authorities.

I returned to Herat about a week after the riots. A tense ceasefire covered the city. Discussions seeking to resolve the crisis had gone back and forth. As I said, Herat traditionally enjoyed sectarian tranquility. The riots had been a shock to the system. It did not take Sherlock Holmes to investigate its causes. I was certain that Ismael Khan's henchmen were responsible. In my view, Karzai had blundered by sending IK back to resolve the crisis. Because of Karzai's cavalier treatment of Governor Anwari, many believed the governor would be out of office very shortly. Even I supposed a grace period of a few months might be all the time the governor had left in Herat. There was fear that IK or one of his loyal sub-commanders would replace Anwari.

This is what IK probably calculated - that Governor Anwari would be crippled and the people of Herat would clamor for him to return and retake the reigns of provincial power. He would then serve as both governor and minister, a concentration of power second to none in Afghanistan.

Why would he want to do this? Why return to Herat when he is already a minister in Kabul? I thought it was the money. The government had begun to put the clamp on the Herat customs house, a huge source of revenue. Customs revenue collected in Herat formed a large portion of GOA-generated revenue. When IK was governor, his people ran the customs house. He took the money for his Herat projects, and for himself. Only a small portion of the revenue reached central government coffers in Kabul. He was no longer governor but until early 2006 his cronies remained at the customs house. With our pressure, the GOA replaced the top people at customs. IK's control over customs and its revenue was severed. It was hoped revenue would now flow straight to the central government. I suspected IK did not want to lose control of the money. He likely strategized that his triumphant return to Herat would allow him to regain control over the customs revenue. There was little chance of that happening given our focused attention to customs reform in general. But I believe this was IK's elaborate scheme which led to the Ashura riots. Like the dog that did not bark, the riots just did not fit the city's history of sectarian tranquility.

Much to his credit, Governor Anwari proved to be adept at both politics and diplomacy. He demonstrated competent leadership following the crisis and he survived in office. He was still governor two years later.

I enjoyed a close personal relationship with one of IK's key lieutenants, Haji Baqi. Mike Metrinko who had served at the Herat PRT earlier had suggested I contact Baqi. I found Baqi friendly and informed. When I knew him, Haji Baqi was working at what I called the Ministry of Kamaz, the ubiquitous Soviet trucks. I am not sure it was a real job but it did provide the Haji some patronage. If there was any subtle message that needed passing to the IK people, I trusted Haji would take care of it.

I will relate a funny anecdote about Haji Baqi. One evening in his house, we were conversing. His teenage son was serving tea. Out of the blue, I asked Haji how many sons he had. Haji Baqi answered "fourteen." "No," I said, "I asked how many sons you had, not how old you son was." The boy turned to his father. "Father, you have seventeen sons." He did not even learn how many daughters he had! Big families were the rule. The antiquities dealer, Haji Sultan Hamidy, an ancient man who for decades had a well known handicrafts and antiquities shop across from the main mosque, told me he had eighteen children from two wivetwelve and six. Hamidy also operated the blue glass factory where a hunchback hand blew the glass in a small room a few doors away.

During my assignment I sought to promote women's issues. It was a hard slog and I wish I had had more success. For example, a group of twenty teenage girls had formed up a basketball club, something absolutely unique in Herat. The girls received uniforms from the Italians. They practiced in a decrepit barn-like building in the central park. I knew that the Public Diplomacy (PD) section at the embassy was planning to bring a basketball coach to Kabul to work with local basketball players. My request to PD to have the coach come to Herat kept bouncing around PD and was eventually brushed with the ultimate excuse: security concerns by the Regional Security Officer. In another instance, a half dozen handicapped women who also happened to be journalists started a women's newspaper called Tahime. To my knowledge, it was the only one of its kind in the country. To keep publishing each week, the newspaper needed some support. Operating expenses for one year were $5,000. They needed a digital camera, a printer, and some office furniture. I submitted a request for funding to Counterpart International which was managing an USAID small grants program. The paperwork was totally out of proportion to the level of help being sought. We asked the Italians for help and they donated computers to the women. But I was not successful in getting funding from Kabul for the group.

Let me sum up my observations. In some ways little has changed in Afghanistan since the turbulence of the 1990s. Warlords retain the levers of power; they are represented in high level government positions. They are still influential and powerful. But their hold on Afghanistan is weakening. The question remains who or what will fill the void.

The 2005 parliamentary elections contributed to the current "warlordism." President Karzai decided that in the parliamentary elections there would be no primary or run-off system. Instead, it would be a plurality system with no threshold for being on the ballot. Anyone who wanted to run for public office could run. By law a certain percentage of parliamentarians had to be women. Dozens competed for each parliament seat - and many candidates represented no more than a neighborhood constituency, a street, or one village. The vote was spilt exceedingly narrowly. The winning candidate often achieved victory with no more than one and a half percent of the vote! Who were the candidates able to muster one or two percent of the vote to win? Often they were the Jamiat Islami or candidates loyal to IK or another warlord. Even though the vast majority of Afghans did not prefer these candidates, they were usually elected.

During those elections, there were occasional examples of candidates winning with ten or even fifteen percent of the vote. One female candidate in Herat, Fauzia Galani, won with an amazing low double digit percentage. (According to my sources, she won overwhelmingly simply because her campaign posters and election photo showed she had a beautiful face and showed a scandalous wisp of dark hair over her forehead.) Many candidates were elected with less than two percent of the vote. The make-up of the new parliament tilted towards the warlords, Islamists, and hard-line factionalists. Perhaps, this represented a premature birth of the democratic political process.

Afghanistan does not yet have political parties in the traditional western sense. But give USAID credit for its democracy program run by NDI, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs based in Washington. I participated in a few of NDI's events. According to NDI, in early 2006 twenty-nine political parties were registered in Herat alone! That was too many. I urged at NDI gatherings that the parties consider consolidation. Most parties, I observed, shared the same views.

The political process was just beginning. It will take some time to take root. In the interim, many who win elections will be those who represent the existing power bases, including warlord factions.

Q: Anything else about Herat before we move on?

COHEN: I have one more story to tell. You spoke about mullahs. A very curious incident took place with me as the centerpiece. It involved one of the main instigators of the Ashura riots, a so-called mullah named Farouk Husseni. He was slimy, but I did not always choose my contacts. We were discussing Islam in my office. He invited me to the Friday prayers at his mosque April 21, 2006. To show respect, I readily agreed. This was a unique opportunity.

Fridays are a day off for PRT interpreters. At the time I was actually interviewing candidates to serve as my assistant, or FSN (Foreign Service national). As part of the interview process, I asked candidate finalists to escort me to a meeting and provide interpretation. I wanted to observe how they performed. On this particular Friday, the candidate I had asked to assist did not show up. I was prepared to leave for the mosque and still had no interpreter. I tried to track him down. I finally reached a family member who claimed the candidate was at the hospital with his sick mother, an extraordinary lame excuse for someone seeking a prestigious job. I did not have an interpreter but went to the mosque anyway. I figured it would be disrespectful not to attend.

I showed up at the mosque without an interpreter. My Italian escort waited in their vehicles. Before prayers I met with Houseni and we sat for about half an hour and communicated the best we could. It was not much. He presented me with a Koran. I attempted to read some Arabic. He invited me to sit in the front row for prayers. We went through the entire prayer service. I stood up when everyone else stood. I sat when everyone sat. I could not follow along. I did not understand a word of what was happening. As the prayers ended, the mosque filled with men. It became very crowded. Armed security appeared. This, I thought, was quite curious. Finally, at the very end of the prayers, Houseni announced something. He called me Abdullah; my new name is Abdullah, he said. He announced, in Dari of course, that I had converted to Islam. Houseni also had contacted the local vernacular press which showed up.

I was really upset. The congregants reached out to touch me. There was bedlam. The guards tried to keep order. I made it out of there, barely. Reporters tried to ask me questions. I emerged from the crowd and I got back to the car. The Italians escorted me to the PRT. I contacted the embassy and gave them a heads up on what had happened. Sure enough, the press had gotten a report out quickly. The embassy was already getting BBC and Reuters inquiries as to the American diplomat in Heart who converted to Islam. I had to nip this in the bud. I prepared a statement that denied the report which the embassy used. I explained it was a misunderstanding. I had not converted. To set the record straight I gave an interview to a local journalist. The embassy did some small damage control. It was a one day news story. But I was really pissed at Houseni.

A week later I had my chance at revenge. Houseni apparently learned that I was unhappy about the episode. I had poured out my venom to the governor, to Haji Baqi, and others. I explained what had happened. All of them condemned this behavior as un-Islamic, that Islam no longer forced people to converalthough I am not sure that is true.

Houseni contacted me. He wanted to come by the PRT to discuss things. I said fine. Beforehand I arranged to have two officers, an American and a Hungarian, wait next door out of sight. I also put a tiny tape recorder in my shirt pocket. Houseni came by my office. We were in the conference room and I let him talk. By the way, all the interpreters at the PRT were so scared of this guy they refused to interpret this meeting for me. Finally, Hashim, one of the better interpreters, stepped forward. Houseni claimed the incident at the mosque was a misunderstanding. He tried to be apologetic and finished what he had to say.

Finally, I spoke. "Under Islam, is not a mosque, God's house, a sanctuary of peace? When inside a mosque, is it not the safest place in the world?" Houseni answered "of course!" "Then, why would I require armed protection in God's house? Is it not a violation of God's tenants to enter a mosque bearing arms? Does that not violate the sanctity of the mosque?" He could not readily answer. I continued. "When in a mosque, God's house, must not the sanctity of the holy place be preserved? To pray, communicate directly with God?" He responded yes, of course. "Then why did you allow journalists to enter God's house, to disturb my own communication with God, and disturb everyone else's? Is that not improper in a house of God?" He could not answer that one either. I took his Koran that he had gifted to me. I kissed it out of respect and handed it back to him. I said I cannot keep this holy book which was given to me in false pretences. He must take it back. I had in my office a New Testament Bible, left by one of my predecessors. I handed it to him. I said take this as my gift to you. I called in the two officers who had been listening through the wall. I lectured Houseni whom I knew had instigated the Ashura riots. I told him that if any more sectarian problems arose in Herat, this city, any violence, then he would become my guest - at either Guantanamo or Bagram!

I tried to shake him up but am uncertain I succeeded. Since then, there have been no serious sectarian problems or riots in Heart. I suspect the message drifted back to Ismael Khan. But I understand Houseni is still making trouble in Herat.

That was my story about becoming a Muslim. Some people in the embassy did not permit me to live it down. Every time he would see me, the DCM, Dick Norland, called me Abdullah!

Q: You left Afghanistan in 2006 and, to conclude, I note that you returned to Herat as a private entrepreneur?

COHEN: Before my consultative life, I spent almost one year in the Bureau of Examinations (BEX) as a Foreign Service assessor. I retired from the State Department the end of July 2007.

I returned to Herat in October 2007 and again in February 2008. I assisted the Turkish-American businessman, Ray, whom I mentioned before. His company, Summit Associates, was expanding its operations in Afghanistan. He asked me to help with obtaining OPIC financing for an expansion of his investment.

Ray built a successful business exporting frozen U.S. poultry to Afghanistan. On numerous occasions during my time in Herat I helped him. When doing business in Afghanistan, or most anywhere in the developing world, all sorts of problems arise. "Rent seekers" are everywhere. The embassy economic officer Rian Harris and I expended much effort to protect his interests. I developed a close relationship with Ray. His enterprise was, in my view, viable and a win-win for both Afghanistan and the U.S. We needed more entrepreneurs like him. In my view one businessman exporting poultry and meat products to Afghanistan was having a more significant impact on that country than much of our assistance. By exporting a U.S. product, the company built our balance of trade. Ray also provided Afghans with a high protein, high quality food product. Afghanistan is severely protein deficient. As I noted earlier, poor quality food products flood the country. Afghans do not get access to quality food products. Ray employed Afghans. He created a chain of cold storage facilities throughout the country. This was foreign direct investment. What a concept! We talk about Afghanistan and give lip service to promoting business there. Ray is the only person I know who has demonstrated how to invest successfully. The big companies that attend Department of Commerce promotion events do not put money into Afghanistan. Big companies may send representatives on highly orchestrated trade missions with a lot of pomp and circumstance but do not invest. Any money that goes into the country gets recycled and turned around very quickly. "Get your money in and out as quickly as possible with as high a rate of return as feasible." Here was an instance where a small businessman was actually investing for the long term, not just a year or two but for ten, fifteen years.

After I retired, I continued to assist him. He constantly needed advice and help. Ray helped me become incorporated. I created a small company called Lawrence Cohen Associates - for lack of a better name. I escorted Ray to Afghanistan to help him with various issues, particularly the next step in his investment. In March 2008, he signed a commitment letter with OPIC (Overseas Private Investment Corporation). Everything that he has done so far has been self-generated from Summit's earnings. The company reached a point where to reach the next level a significant investment was required. Ray needed financing so as not to hinder his working capital requirements. That is where we are now. To deal with OPIC is not easy for small companies without staffs of accountants and lawyers. The company consists of Ray and his two sons and a partner. I am excited about the prospects. And it gets me back there. We'll see how this goes, my post-Foreign Service life. I also have been assisting the Bureau of Examinations (BEX) with the new exam process, teach tradecraft at FSI, and, for a few months at least, work on the Egypt Desk. I do intend to publish the Chicken Hill Chronicle sometime soon.

Q: Great. Well, Larry, I want to thank you very much. I think we will end it at this point.

COHEN: Okay.

End of interview