Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

PETER DAVID EICHER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: When and where were you born?

EICHER: I was born in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia on April 26, 1950.

Q: I used to register babies in Dhahran too back in 1958 to 1960.

EICHER: You were assigned there?

Q: Yes, I was the consular officer.

Okay, Peter; let's take your father's side. When and where did the Eichers come from and what do you know about them?

EICHER: Well, the Eichers have been in the United States since before the American Revolution. My grandmother was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution and could trace our ancestry all the way back to St. Louis, King Louis IX of France, as well as a king of the Netherlands. But she was a Boyd, not an Eicher until she married, of course.

Q: What were the early Eichers doing in the U.S.?

EICHER: I'm not quite sure what they were all doing, actually. The best records we have are on my grandmother's side, that's my father's mother, the Boyd family. The first of my ancestors to reach America came to New York when it was still New Amsterdam. They were Dutch. The Eichers came at a later point, I'm not sure when or where. The Boyds came in the 1700's and eventually they made their way to upstate New York.

Q: Well, let's talk about upstate New York. When is the first time you are aware of what your grandparents or your great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents were doing in upstate New York?

EICHER: You know, I'm not quite sure when I first became aware. I know that my grandmother did proudly keep a handwritten book that showed the family history generation by generation all the way back through these illustrious names that I have dropped. If I recall correctly, it was a member of the Dutch royal house of de Graff who traveled to New Amsterdam. I remember visiting the main cathedral in Amsterdam once and finding a very old de Graff tomb there; perhaps it was a member of the same family. But at some point a de Graff descendant in America married a Boyd, which was my grandmother's family. It's her familthe Boydwho were in upstate New York. They were originally a Scotch-Irish family and immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1700s. One of the early Boyds was a private in the New York militia during the American Revolution and later went on to be state assemblyman, I think, and was involved in building the Erie Canal and I think served as a weigh master on the Canal. As for the Eicher family, I'm not sure exactly when or where they arrived in the U.S., although it also was before the Revolution. The Eichers were Swiss-German and, I think, migrated to the U.S. by way of Strasbourg, but I don't recall the circumstances; I believe we have it in the family records somewhere.

Q: What do you know about your grandparents on your father's side?

EICHER: On my father's side my grandfather was a pharmaceutical chemist and he lived in Chicago, although I believe he was born in South Dakota. I remember him talking about the farm in South Dakota. After they moved to Chicago and he became a chemist, he was, in fact, the first person to put cod liver oil into a tablet, which I guess was rather revolutionary at the time. He was never a big businessman but was a reasonably successful small businessman, with his own very small factory making pills. He and his family did alright in the Depression, since medicines are one of the last things people give up, even in hard times. I remember liking his stories about when he was a boy, how motorcars were still so rare that all the kids would run down the street to see whenever one passed. He also talked about going out to the shores of Lake Michigan to see the first airplanes fly over. I used to think that was strange and amusing, and now I find myself doing the same sort of thing with my grandchildretelling them about the days when we didn't have computers, video players, and such, and telling them about watching on TV when the first man landed on the moon.

Q: And your grandfather?

EICHER: That is my grandfather I've been talking about. My father was an oilman, a petroleum geologist and micro-paleontologist, hence the assignment in Dhahran. He was working for ARAMCO (the Arabia-American Oil Company) at the time.

Q: What part of the oil business was he in?

EICHER: He was a geologist, involved in exploration for oil. He spent many years in the Middle East. He was looking for oil in the Middle East, especially in Egypt and the Sahara. During World War II, he was exploring for oil in the Middle East. He was exempted from the army because they thought his work looking for oil was more important for the war effort than serving as an infantryman would have been. He was working for ESSO and then went to ARAMCO, which I think was associated with ESSO.

Q: Did the Middle East play much of a role in the stories in the family?

EICHER: Oh yes. You haven't asked me about my mother's side yet.

She was of Egyptian nationality and was part of a Sephardic Jewish family that has both Spanish and Italian heritage. Her family was part of the huge community of Jews and other non-Arabs that lived in Egypt, and particularly in Alexandria, at that point. She worked with the British Armas a secretary, I thinduring the War. I remember her stories of Cairo being bombed and of being able to hear the guns during the Battle of El Alamein. She and my father met there not long after the War and were married in Egypt in 1947.

Q: The Sephardic Jews, how did they get started in Egypt?

EICHER: We don't have good family records on that side, perhaps in part because much of the family was in Europe and died in the Holocaust. My mother's farther was one of 13 children, I believe, and her mother was one of 11 children, so we're talking very large families, many of whom didn't survive, particularly on my grandfather's side. In term of how they got to Egypt, I believe if may go back to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain around 1492. I don't know where the family really came from that long ago. My grandfather did have a Spanish last namErrera. He himself was from Thessalonica, which at the time was part of the Ottoman Empire, and he was a relatively recent immigrant to Egypt from there. My grandmother's family was the Naggiars, a fairly prominent family in the Jewish community in Egypt, who had been there for I don't know how many generations.

Q: What was the status of the Jewish community at that time?

EICHER: There was a big Jewish community in Egypt, especially in Alexandria. It was part of a quite a cosmopolitan group. Alexandria at the time had huge communities of Greeks and Italians and others as well, a very cosmopolitan city. The foreign communities, and in particular the Jews, did not leave in large numbers until after Nasser took over.

So, I come from this background which on one side is Daughters of the American Revolution/Presbyterian and on the other side and a first generation Egyptian Jewish immigrant. And, of course, there are lots of other nationalities mixed in. If you scratch me, I'll bleed almost every country in Europe and the Middle East.

Q: What were your mother's parents up to?

EICHER: My grandfather on my mother's side, Moise Errera, was a cotton broker but I can't say that I know a lot more than that about his background or his work. They were certainly not religious Jews, and even sent my mother to Catholic schools when she was little.

Q: Let's take your mother. What sort of schooling did she have?

EICHER: She went to, I don't know, I guess it must been private schools in Alexandria as she was growing up. At that time, the good private schools in Egypt were still French language schools. French was her first language and the language her parents spoke at home, although they were of Spanish and Italian ancestry.

Q: Did she go to college?

EICHER: She did go to university in Alexandria.

Q: Your father, what sort of education did he have?

EICHER: He went to university as well. He did geology and micropaleontology at the University of Chicago and got a master's degree in it.

Q: How long were you in Dhahran?

EICHER: For about a year and, of course, I don't remember it. My parents really did not like Saudi Arabia very much. At the time, Dhahran was really very much just an oil camp and they were looking to get out so they left as soon as they could.

Q: What sort of life was it for them? Did they talk about it much?

EICHER: You know, I think it was the kind of life which might not have been very different from embassy life on an isolated compound some place. They were out in the middle of the desert. There was a group of people out there working in exploration and production, living in what I sense from old family pictures were very small, neat houses and kind of a landscape that you would be familiar with out on the coast of Saudi Arabia. From what I've been told, it was a very quiet kind of existence and probably tough. You know, the climate was tough, the isolation was tough and there was certainly very, very little to do. I remember my mother complaining that they used to blow the whistle for the men to go to work and come home, which used to be a big irritation to my dad, who of course was a professional, as were most of the people there were, and it wasn't as if they were punching in at a factory, so they wondered why there had to be a whistle for them to come to work in the morning.

Q: Where did your parents go then?

EICHER: After that they went back to New York. I can't remember when he switched to which oil company because I was so young at the time but he worked with an oil company in New York for a little while. We lived in the New York suburbHartsdale and Bronxvillfor a couple of years and then went back to Egypt. He was assigned back to Egypt for more exploration work there so we lived in Cairo and Alexandria for a few years. He actually switched to Conoco at some point.

Q: Do you recall Egypt at all?

EICHER: I do recall it a little bit. I left when I was six so it was more impressions than serious memories. But I do remember some incidents, and places, and people and smells and tastes. I started school there, at a British school. In fact, I was later assigned to Egypt as one of my Foreign Service posts and although I had not been there for thirty years, there were more things that were familiar that I expected. I even remember walking around Alexandria with my wife and when we came to one neighborhood I said "boy, this is familiar." I checked later with my parents and found that it was the neighborhood where we lived. I left Egypt in 1956, during the Suez crisis, when I was only six years old. We were evacuated, along with the rest of the American community. I was pulled out of school one day and put on a very crowded ship with the rest of my family and lots of other people. We didn't have a cabin and I shared a sofa in one of the lounges with my brother as a bed. We sailed away and were met in the Mediterranean by the U.S. Sixth Fleet. It seemed like an adventure. And, as I said, I wouldn't see Egypt again for 30 years. My mother's family was still there when we left, but most of them would also leave within the next few years.

Q: Well, then what?

EICHER: Then Houston, Texas for five years, another oil town, of course, company headquarters. It was my chance to become an American, to grow up in a regular American town, go to an American elementary school, and to get to be a Texan. I spent most of elementary school there; we stayed five years. From there we moved to Paris, France. My father was still working with Conoco, which was doing exploration mainly in Senegal and Mauritania so he would spend a lot of time traveling down there but based out of Paris. I suppose that was the most comfortable place to live when exploring for oil in Africa.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Houston. What do you think of Houston?

EICHER: It was where I spent my elementary school years, so its not as if I had a deep knowledge of the place. For me, it was nice, a good childhood. There was a pleasant school, baseball games, friends, neighborhoods, and bicycles, television, and everything that goes with an American childhood.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

EICHER: I don't think that I was an enormous reader but I guess I was always a reader. I liked reading. I started with comic books and moved up through novels.

Q: In elementary school was there sort of a series of books that sort of impressed you?

EICHER: Well, you know, I was certainly reading a lot of Hardy Boy books and things of that kind. I think there were also a lot of simple history type books that I used to read. There was one series called Landmark Books that I remember reading several of, that were simple biographies or maybe history stories of the Texas Rangers or the American Revolution or things like that. Eventually I moved on up to adult books, maybe starting with Agatha Christie. I can't remember at what age I might've picked up what. I do remember that I was reading real adult novels by the time we arrived in Paris, which would have been sixth grade. Exodus is the first fat book I remember reading.

Q: How about school? Were you much of a student?

EICHER: I was a pretty good student. I didn't tend to be first in the class but I was up there among the bright students, if you will.

Q: At home, did you have brothers and sisters?

EICHER: I have one brother who is about 16 months older than me, so we were always pretty close. Since we moved around a lot, I always had a companion who was about my age. We tended to like the same things and do things together quite a bit.

Q: Did your mother give you much of a taste of Egypt and that part of the family?

EICHER: No, not all that much on a day to day basis, but a certain amount was always there. I think her philosophy was with that she wanted us to be real Americans and to fit in with the American kids. So, for example, we always spoke English at home, even though French was her native language. You know, if you were living in Houston, Texas as an elementary school student in the 1950s and you were speaking some language other than English at home, then people would have thought you were a little weird. I think she very much wanted to avoid that and so there was probably less emphasis on the foreign side of the family than there might have been. But, of course, I did know that I had a lot of foreign relatives. I did speak a little bit of French because when we saw the relatives we would speak to them in French. So I first learned French the same way I learned English, by speaking it, not by taking lessons. But since we didn't speak it at home, it was never great French, just passable, with lots of mistakes and a heavy American accent. In retrospect, as a Foreign Service officer I sometimes looked back and thought that it would have been nice to have spoken more French at home so that my French would have been much better. But that was in retrospect; it certainly wasn't something I wanted to do at the time.

Q: The family didn't speak Arabic?

EICHER: Not Arabic at home, no. I'm not even sure they spoke fluent Arabic although they certainly knew some. They were very much European Egyptians, although they were Egyptian nationality.

Q: Alexandria was quite a unique place, the society there.

Did any elementary teachers sort of stick out?

EICHER: You know, I could probably remember most of the names my teachers in Texas but I can't remember much about them really. I do remember in retrospect, you know, it was very much the era of segregation and even though it was a public school, it was a white school. I do have a memory of my third grade teacher railing against integration at one point, saying the way things were going we were all going to be chocolate-colored and she was certainly glad that she would be dead and gone by that time. As in all of the South, there were still separate facilities, for example, white and "colored" water fountains. In fact, I have an early memory of being with my brother at a supermarket and seeing the two water fountains and flipping on the colored one and being surprised that it wasn't colored water coming out of it. I guess that shows we weren't too keenly aware at that stage about racial segregation.

Q: When did you leave Houston and go back to Paris?

EICHER: To Paris. That was 1961.

Q: When you were about eleven years old.

EICHER: I was just in the early weeks of sixth grade so I was eleven years old.

Q: Where did you go to school? How long were you in Paris?

EICHER: About two and a half years. I went to school first at the English School of Paris because there was no room at the American School that year. The next year I transferred to the American School for seventh grade. I stayed there for a year and a half before the next move. It was a beautiful school, out in Louveciennes, a suburb of Paris. The school was set in a couple of old chateaus, really quite a place to go to school. One of them was the DuBarry pavilion, where Mme DuBarry, Louis XV's mistress, did her entertaining.

Q: How did you find that?

EICHER: It was really very, very nice. We lived in downtown Paris. We very much enjoyed the freedom of the city, we could take the metro and bus by ourselves, wander the streets by ourselves, go to movies, museums, wander the Champs Elysee, find the bowling alleys or whatever, you know, that we wanted to do. We spoke enough French to get around quite easily and enjoyed Paris life very much. We had a lot of good friends, of course mainly Americans because we were going to the American school. I should mention that I met my wife there. She was in my class at the American school for the second half of seventh grade and the first half of eighth grade. We didn't know each other well, but it was a small school so everyone knew everyone else a bit. Our older brothers ended up being good friends.

Q: They were no particular constraints about wandering around Paris?

EICHER: None at all. There were a few terrorist attacks there at the time, as Algeria was seeking its independence. De Gaulle was president of France. I didn't understand a lot of what was going on politically at that time. I guess I didn't pay much attention to it at the age I was when I got there. There were a couple of bomb blasts in town including one at the American drugstore right on the Champs Elysee which got a lot of publicity and I guess even more publicity here in the United States, perhaps. People might call from the U.S. and say, "Are you okay?" as they tend to do when they hear about anything that goes wrong in a country when you are assigned there. But basically, it was a safe city at the time, at least in the neighborhoods we hung out in.

Q: Was there much intermingling with the French?

EICHER: Extremely little. Not as a matter of policy but just because we didn't. We went to the American School, so we had American friends. There were a few French kids at school who we might get to know who, for whatever reason, had been put there by their parents to learn English or whatever. Some of the American kids, like me, hadn't been able to get into the American School when they first arrived and were put on a waiting list but unlike me, some had gone to a French school for a year rather than a British school and so they had some French friends. I got to know a few of them a little bit but generally, not very much. We also had a few French friends through family connections but with a couple of exceptions they don't really stand out as people we spent a lot of time with. So, it was I suppose in some ways it was very exotic and cultured to be growing up in Paris and be exposed to so many European things. In other ways, it was probably very much like any twelve year old growing up in a big city anyplace else.

Q: You were about fourteen when you left there?

EICHER: Thirteen. We left there at the beginning of 1964 and moved to London, which was another company headquarters in Europe. I can't recall what may have been the business reason for my father's move from Paris to London. We were very, very sorry to leave Paris, of course. It was a nice life, a lot of good friends, a nice city to be in. We were always sad to leave the places we lived.

London turned out to be a wonderful place, of course. It's a great city. At that time it was the kind of city you could be safe wandering almost anyplace. There was a lot to do, all kinds of things going on. The music scene was very activit was just the time that I was getting into pop music and so fortand of course London was the place at the time. It was the time of the "British invasion," when all the most popular rock music was coming from England. We actually lived in a small apartment building where two of the Beatles were living when they were just getting started. It was our temporary place when we first moved to London and where we lived for three or four months while we looked for permanent housing. George and Ringo were living in the apartment directly upstairs from us. There were only six or seven flats in the building. There would be girls outside screaming. It was kind of a fun experience. And heady, especially for a 13 or 14-year-old. The two Beatles didn't stay long once the fans discovered they were living there.

Q: You were in London how long?

EICHER: Two and a half years.

Q: Where were you going to school?

EICHER: Although there was an American School of London right in town, the school that was recommended as the place to go was actually the American Air Force school, which was out in the distant suburbs of London. That didn't have room when I got there, so I was on a waiting list for the last half of my eighth grade year. I went to a couple of little British schools which they called "tutorial schools," which, I think, I don't know quite how or why they existed, but they did seem to cater to people who were going to be there a very short time and had very small classes of five or six people. They would try to give you individual attention, so it was okay. It gave me a lot of exposure to real British things, British history and British ways of doing things, which I had already encountered for most of a year at the English School of Paris. I was in the tutorial schools only for a few months and then as I started ninth grade, high school, I was able to transfer out to the American Air Force school, which was called Central High School at that point.

Q: How did you find that?

EICHER: Well, that was good fun. I was there as a teenager. High school was fun in London. It was a very long bus ride out to the school out in the suburbs, so some of the best friends we made were the other kids who rode the bus with us. I think we did more than an hour each direction on the bus every day from downtown London out to the school but once you got there it was very much a little piece of America. In a way, it looked like a lot of the American military bases in Europe. It still had lots of Quonset huts built to last through the end of World War II, but they were still there being used for one thing or another, in this case, as a school. They had a new gym and football teams and student councils and all kinds of normal American school activities.

Q: Looking back during that time, how did your education come out?

EICHER: I think it came out pretty well. You know, it was kind of a conglomeration that wasn't necessarily as logical a progression as it would have been for somebody who went through the same school system all their life. Changing schools every year or two, I was probably missing some structure and probably missed some topics completely as a result. On the other hand, I probably picked up a lot of things that I would not have picked up in a standard American school system, particularly with my stints at the English School of Paris and another half-year at the English schools in England. During those years, I kept hearing 1066 is the most important year to remember, rather than 1492. I mean, those kinds of things, and lots of stories of king this and king that and our proud British heritage, in a way that I might not have gotten at all otherwise.

Q: Did you and your brother get much chance to talk about current events and what was happening around the dinner table and that sort of thing or not at all?

EICHER: I think we did. We were a family who did sit and have dinner together and that was partly because we were in Europe and there weren't the TV shows on there like in the States. Eating dinner with the family I guess we talked partly about what happened to us during the day, but it seems to me my folks were always interested in world affairs and that there were probably a lot of things going on in the world that we talked about. I would be hard pressed maybe to come up with a lot of specific conversations and topics that we talked about but certainly, I remember discussions of de Gaulle and even Macarios and the British politicians of the time, Wilson and Heath, and others who were in power then, not to mention things that were going on in the States as well, which must have come up. We used to get the New York Herald Tribune, and I remember reading that. At first, when we got to Paris, I was mainly interested in the comics, but over the years I started reading more of the paper. Even back in Houston, I remember watching the Kennedy-Nixon debates on television. I remember, where I was when I heard Kennedy was assassinatedoing my homework one night in Paris. By the time we left London, the Vietnam War was already becoming an issue. I remember some discussions at home about that, as well.

Q: Did your mother, particularly your mother, and father, did Egypt and Israel come up as a subject much?

EICHER: Very little, that I remember. Not long after 1956, when most of the foreigners left Egypt, most of my mother's family left also. I can't remember exactly what years. Most of them, had or managed to get Italian passports and left for Europe. There were also quite a few who already lived in France. In fact, when we were living in Paris there was quite a number of my mother's relatives there. A few ended up in Switzerland as well. So, there was a big group of relatives with Egyptian connections scattered around Europe and in that context every once in a while there would be conversations about Egypt primarily but very little about Israel. My mother's brother moved to Israel but as far as I know he was the only member of the family who did and my mother did not stay in touch with him.

Q: Did the American embassy intrude much in your affairs? Did you know it existed?

EICHER: Well, we knew it existed, of course. It intruded very little in our affairs. I seem to remember going to the embassies and in London certainly, in Paris probably. It must have been to get passports renewed or to get new passports or something like that. Aside from that, I'm not sure we had any direct contact with the embassies. But, of course, we had a lot of friends at school whose parents were working for the embassy, so we knew lots of embassy kids as well as oil company kids and others. The embassy kids seemed privileged because they could use the PX and get real American stuff, unlike us company kids who had to live off the local market. It would be a little treat to join the embassy kids or the military kids to get hamburgers in both London and Paris. There were actually places right downtown in both cities, as well as out in the bases in the suburbs, with embassy clubs or officers clubs. I'm not quite sure what they were, but you could go and get a hamburger, etcetera there if you had a pass, which the embassy kids did. You couldn't do it on the local market; there weren't any McDonald's or anything like that at that point.

Q: What about the Cold War when you were a kid, was it an issue?

EICHER: I guess it was. I grew up at the time when we used to have air raid drills in elementary school. I can't remember how often, you know, once a month or once a week or whatever. The teachers would tell you to get down on your knees underneath your little desk and tuck your head between your knees so that when the atomic blast went off you couldn't see it and you wouldn't be hurt by flying glass. In retrospect it seems a little comical, as if crouching under your desk would protect you from an atomic blast. There were events like the Cuban missile crisis and Khrushchev banging his shoe that I remember hearing about as they happened, although I don't recall that they affected my life very much at the time. I remember the beginnings of the space race, of course. For the first few launches of American astronauts they let us out of class in elementary school to watch the blast-offs. You know, I can remember odds and ends but not really a great coherent saga of the Cold War. Of course, I became more and more aware when we were in Europe and I grew older. By the time I was in high school, I was certainly well aware of the Cold War and international developments.

Q: You left London when?

EICHER: It would have been 1966, after my sophomore year of high school. We moved back to the States. My father was transferred back to New York headquarters. We ended up living in Connecticut

Q: Where did you live in Connecticut?

EICHER: We lived in Westport, Connecticut, which was an hour's train ride from New York, so it was a long commute for my father. I went to the public high school there which was very good and finished up my high school. My mother worked as a French teacher at a local private school. My brother went off to college, so I was the only child at home for the first time. By coincidence, my wife-to-be, who had been in my junior high class in Paris, had also moved to Westport and was in high school with me there. That's where we finally got together; I married my high school sweetheart.

Q: What was Westport like? Was this a commuter town or what?

EICHER: It was pretty much a commuter town and it was already a pretty prominent upper class commuter town. Generally, the closer you went to New York, the more the real estate prices went up. In Greenwich and Darien, where the commute was shorter, the prices were higher. Westport at the time was probably near the outer limits of how far most people wanted to commute. It was already a very nice place to be. There were a few movie or TV stars living there. Paul Newman lived in a big place very close to where our house was. At that time, Westport was also still a town where there were a lot of people who had grown up there and there were some less well off parts of town, but certainly not poor. Nowadays, I understand you can't look at a house in Westport for less than a million dollars. I get back there from time to time. My dad is buried there so I occasionally go back when I visit my mother and brother who live in New Haven.

Q: You graduated when?

EICHER: In 1968.

Q: In 1968, how did Vietnam play, first for your family and then in high school?

EICHER: It played big-time. I mean, it was right at the time of big military buildups and national protests. 1968, of course, was the big presidential campaign where Johnson dropped out and there was the McCarthy movement against the war. We ended up with Humphrey running against Nixon, so it was a big political year. It was also, of course, the year that Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated. I remember being activist enough already to have helped organize little protests, memorial sit-ins on the school green after those assassinations and participating in those. My brother, who was two grades ahead of me, was already very much worried about the draft and he was really coming down very strongly on the antiwar side of things for personal and philosophical reasons. I know his views helped influence mine. I initially got a college deferment, but those were soon ended. While I was in college, the draft changed to the lottery system. I drew number 340, so I was safe.

Q: What was the high school like?

EICHER: It was a big, suburban high school, in my view a very big high school. There were probably about 600 kids in each grade, grades ten through twelve, which was huge compared to the schools I have been going to overseas. The Paris school class had maybe fifty people and now I was in a class of 600, so that was enormous. The school was spread out on a big campus much like the Foreign Service Institute. It was very active and a lot of things were going on: football games, dances, proms. Since Westport was an artsy town and people had connections, there seemed to be a lot of big performers who would come perform even at the high school auditorium. We had people like Louis Armstrong and also got a lot of big pop and rock acts of the time, the Young Rascals, Cream, and Pete Seeger. It seemed unusual to get this sort of people to come to a high school. Adjusting to a school in the States after being overseas is harder than the other way around. At overseas schools, almost all the kids are moving around every couple of years and they come from lots of different places and backgrounds, so it's easier to fit in. In the States, you're more likely to run into established groups of friends who are less open to newcomers. As it turned out, I did fine. I found a group of friends, partly through my wife-to-be, who had already been in the school for a year when I got there. I joined the Service Club, which got me involved in a lot of activities, and was elected president of the club in my senior year.

Q: Where did your family fall politically?

EICHER: Well, my father came from a long line of Republicans. He was a Republican and his father was a Republican. I guess through the Depression his father was very much one of the anti-Roosevelt people. My dad was on the liberal end of the Republican spectrum, more of a Rockefeller Republican. My mother always supported the Democrats and, you know, they would joke that they would cancel each other's votes when they went to the polls. Eventually, my dad started voting democratic, as well. I think he grew disillusioned with the Nixon administration. Also, with his kids supporting the Democrats, he grew philosophical and thought that since it would soon be our world, he would support the path we were supporting.

Q: Did you know what you were going to do when you went to college? Did you have an idea of what your career would be? How did that work out?

EICHER: I didn't know for sure. I had already started thinking about the Foreign Service, although I didn't know very much about it in a practical sense. Having grown up moving around all the time, something international appealed to me a lot. I wanted to continue to move and to see the world. So, I guess it was in my mind that the Foreign Service could be a career, or something else that would take me out to see the world and have more international adventures. I was already thinking that way when I went to college. I went to McGill University in Canada and part of the reason was that it was different, in a way from U.S. universities. I was practically at home but at the same time I was in another country, a French speaking city, and it made it seem more exciting to me. Canada was also a good place to be heading in 1968.

Q: Were you particularly in Canada because of the draft?

EICHER: No, because as I told you I had an exemption and when I left for Canada, I could've expected to have an exemption for the rest of my college career; the lottery came a bit later. It was certainly in my mind, however, that Canada wouldn't be a bad place to be if the situation didn't improve at home and the war continued over the long term. I had been looking mainly at city schools on the East Coast and applied to a number of them and actually went to visit McGill in Montrï¿½al and really fell in love with the city and thought it would be a good school. It had a reputation at the time as "the Harvard of Canada" so it was well regarded academically. It was also far, far cheaper than American schools of the same quality. That was particularly important since I was married right out of high school to my high school sweetheart, Stephanie. The Canadian government subsidized my education, as they did at the time for all students. Later, they boosted the fees for foreign students, but I was gone by then. So, the exotic elemennot that Montrï¿½al was so wildly exotic, but exotic compared to American citiethe price, and my attraction to the city, all contributed to the decision to attend McGill, as well as the knowledge that it would be a good, safe place to be if the war was still an issue when I graduated.

Q: You were at McGill from when to when?

EICHER: From 1968 to 1972.

Q: What was happening in Canada at the time?

EICHER: It was interesting times. Pierre Elliott Trudeau was the young, flamboyant prime minister who was making headlines all over the world and he was fun to watch. In Quï¿½bec province where we were, of course, they had the big separatist movement going on; the Parti Quï¿½becois was probably close to its peak at that point and it looked like there was a quite a chance that Quï¿½bec might head toward independence. There was even a violent separatist movement that undertook some bombings and kidnappings.

Q: Did that affect the campus much?

EICHER: Well, you know, it was an activist campus. It was the late 1960s and early '70s; sit-ins were fun. It was kind of what you did. McGill, of course, was an English university in Quï¿½bec and so it stood to be affected by all of this but as an institution it was not a proponent of separatism, certainly. On the contrary, it was part of the English establishment. It was even a target. There was at least one bombing right on campus while we were there about a block from our apartment. I remember hearing the blast and everybody going out to look and see what had happened, which is, I guess, what we did in those days; you hear a blast and go to it rather than hunker down, as you're advised to do now.

Q: Did you have a feeling that the students, I would think that the students in Canada were looking over their shoulders and seeing the American students having fun raising hell on campuses and they didn't have the same issues to protest. Were they kind of looking around for issues or what?

EICHER: I suppose there was certainly some of that. Yes, I think Canadian campuses were caught up in the same kind of spirit of a new generation of protest that went with the '60s, as was the case in France and other countries not involved in Vietnam. You would have an occasional antiwar rally but it wasn't the same kind of intensity there as in the United States. There were also quite a lot of Americans at McGill who ended up there for one reason or another; some certainly to avoid the draft. In fact, we knew a few who had come up just specifically because their draft number was up and they chose to leave rather than go to Vietnam. It was quite sad in some cases. Some of them really broke with their families over their decision to come to Canada and it made very tough times for them.

Q: Did you have any, at the university, were any efforts made to take the people who defected back to the United States?

EICHER: No. Not that I'm aware of in any case. Canada was pretty much a safe haven. Getting permission to stay in Canada as a permanent resident wasn't necessarily a sure thing. There was a complicated system to apply and be accepted. At the same time, I don't think they were forcibly sending anybody back who was there to avoid the draft.

Q: Did you get any taste of the, I used to call it the syndrome from about half the people who served in Canada, about the Canadians being annoyed at the Americans because Americans don't pay much attention to Canada?

EICHER: You certainly got that feeling. You know, there was a constant sense of sleeping next to an elephant, as they used to say. It didn't make much difference to Americans what happened in Canada one way or the other. On the other hand, every time we sneezed, it affected Canada in big ways. You know, that was just clearly an underlying element of the national culture that they had to deal with.

Q: Did you find any professors who were, particularly at the instructor level, who were radically anti-American because of the war and all that or did that translate itself or not?

EICHER: Not so much, no. I think everyone was anti-wal don't remember any professor who wasn'but I don't think that translated itself into anti-Americanism.

Q: How about McGill and what were you picking up about being at an English university in the middle of a French-speaking place and this was the time, as you said before, Francophones and all that, I mean separatism. Did that translate itself to the campus?

EICHER: It did. There were official efforts to be sensitive to what was going on elsewhere in Quï¿½bec. In fact, I think I was part of the last class that went through McGill in four years. Starting with the next year after me, the university changed to a five-year program designed to give the students more French and to tie in better with the Francophone elements of Quï¿½bec's educational system. So, in fact, McGill may not have been a very attractive choice to me if I had not gone the year that I went. I wasn't looking for an extra year in university.

Q: So you graduated in what, 1970?

EICHER: In 1972.

Q: What were you pointed towards?

EICHER: By that point I was certainly pointed towards an international career and probably the Foreign Service was at the top of my list; by that point, it certainly was. I did first go back for a year of graduate school in the United States. I went to the University of Pennsylvania for a year of international relations. I had done history and political science at McGill. I thought that, first of all, I would be better off with a master's degree than just a BA, and second of all, it would be a good idea to have an American degree as well as a Canadian one. I wanted to limit the program to one year, in part because I needed to get a job and an income. I was still married, of course, and had one son who was born in Canada. The University of Pennsylvania was one of very, very few schools that were actually giving a master's degree in one year. I figured, you know, who's going to frown at my Ivy League master's degree because I got it in one year instead of two? Little did I know that when I joined the Foreign Service, they paid me less because I had a one-year master's than if I had had a two-year master's.

Q: Honest to God?

EICHER: Honest to God. When I joined, with a one-year master's degree, I came in at the whopping salary of nine thousand and some dollars; less than ten thousand. People with only a BA came in at a slightly lower salary and people with a two year master's at a slightly higher one. Still, that was a lot of money to me. I think I passed the $10,000 mark when I got a couple of step increases for testing out of French.

Q: In 1974? When did you take the Foreign Service oral and written exams?

EICHER: I took the written exam in the fall of 1972. There were hundreds of people taking the test in Philadelphia at a big school. It was an all day exam, in several sections. Most of it was multiple choice, with sections on English, as well as a general knowledge section that was kind of fun. And there was at least one essay question. There was a heavier emphasis on English and writing than I expected, which turned out to be good for me, since I did well on that part. At the time, people taking the test had to choose what specialty, or in Foreign Service terms which "cone," they wanted to test in, and one of the sections of the test was targeted to the particular cone you chose. In essence, therefore, you were only competing against other people who chose the same cone. I chose political, because it was far and away of the most interest to me, although you were warned that some cones required higher scores than others to pass, and political was said to be the hardest. Still, I squeaked through and got a letter a few weeks later saying I had passed and inviting me to take the oral exam.

I took the oral in 1973, the beginning of 1973, while I was still a graduate student at Penn.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions or how the exam was constituted?

EICHER: I certainly remember how it was set up. I remember taking the train down from Philadelphia to Washington to take the test. It seems to me you had an essay to write first of all, and then they took each of us separately into a little room with three examiners. I sat there with them for about an hour or so and they fired off various kinds of questions focusing very heavily on foreign policy issues, political issues. I remember that I had two men and a woman on my panel. At some point not long after that I actually tried to make myself a list of the questions I was asked while they were still relatively fresh in my mind and I might still have that list in among the mounds of paper that I have filed away. I do seem to remember them asking questions certainly on the Middle East, on the Brezhnev Doctrine, on terrorism. In particular, I recall that since I had been in Canada, in Quï¿½bec, there had been a couple of little incidents there as part of the Quï¿½becois independence effort, including even the kidnapping of a businessman or something like that; the examiners wondered whether I considered that to be a very serious problem or not. I allowed as how I didn't think it was a particularly serious omen in Quï¿½bec. Certainly, there could be a big political transformation in Canada due to public opinion but I wouldn't see it being accomplished by terrorist means. Later on, I found out that one of the examinerwhose name I cannot remembewas not much impressed by that answer, since he himself had apparently been kidnapped once in Central America. Nevertheless, they did pass me on the exam. To me, the oral almost felt a little bit like a fraternity rush or something like thanot that I've ever been through thabut we hit it off, you know. It seemed like they were kind of my kind of people. We got along well together. We seemed to have things in common. So, after about an hour of questions they sent me out to sit there in another room for a few minutes, I guess while they discussed what to do with me. One of them came out and told me I had passed and go to room something or other and get my fingerprints taken so they could start the security clearance. So off I went.

There was at least one other person there at the time who also passed and was taking the train back to Philadelphia; by coincidence we traveled back together and I later recall running into him maybe once or twice in the State Department.

Q: How long a gap was there before you came in?

EICHER: It was about eight months, if I recall correctly, from the time I passed the oral until the time I came in. I came in in October of 1973, so I guess that was fairly quick to go through the security process, considering how many places I had lived.

Q: In those days it was, yes.

EICHER: After you passed the exam, they didn't actually offer you a job, but they put you on a "rank order register" based on your test score and your cone. At the time, they didn't even tell you where you stood on the register or what the chances of getting a job offer were, or how long you might have to wait. It was all rather mysterious, so even after passing the oral exam you couldn't really judge whether you would make it or not. Of course, I was worried about what might come next if I didn't make it and started looking around for other jobs.

Q: What were you doing in the meantime?

EICHER: Most of the time I was still in school. I probably took the exam in February or something like that and didn't graduate probably until May from graduate school at Penn. Then I went back to what had been my summer job for the previous few years, working for the tax collector of the city of Westport, Connecticut. That took me into August and just about the time I was getting really worriel could have stayed at the tax collector's office but it was hardly a living salarat the end of the summer I got the call asking if I could come start a class at the beginning of October, which I happily accepted.

Q: So you came in in October of 1973?

EICHER: Yes.

Q: What was sort of the constitution of the class, the basic officer class?

EICHER: It was, if I recall, 29 people, of which the average age may have been around 30 or so, maybe a little younger than that. It was the 109th class. They've changed the numbering since then, so at some point there will be another 109th class.

Q: How old were you at the time?

EICHER: I was 23. The average entering age of entering Foreign Service officers at the time was 30 or 32. I think our class was younger than that. There were a number of us who had come straight out of school into the Foreign Service, although the majority had had real-world experience aside from just university. There were even a few who had come in straight from undergraduate rather than graduate school, but there were also a few who had been in the military in Vietnam or had other experience as teachers or whatever. There were four women in the class. There were two or three "Mustangs," as they called them, who had come up through the ranks as specialists and were now becoming officers. At that time, the Foreign Service was sharply divided between officers and staff, even with different pay scales, much more so than today. The Mustangs were very impressive to all of us because they were older and had already had lots of overseas and embassy experience. We were having our class in a high-rise building in Roslyn, which is where the Foreign Service Institute was located at the time.

Q: Were you put into a category as such? I recall the cones.

EICHER: Yes. There were cones and, as I said, at the time you had to declare your cone even before you took your Foreign Service exam written test and whether you passed the test depended on your cone. Depending on what cone you chose, you might be able to get in with a lower score or a higher score. Political at the time required the highest score to get in. That's what I chose because it was what I was most interested in and of course, being young and full of self-confidence I thought, why should I try for something less? I do remember at least one guy in our class who came in as an administrative officer grousing frequently that he really wanted to be a political officer and had only taken the administrative test because he thought it would be easier to get in and that he would switch over as soon as possible. So yes, that was an issue.

I remember, in fact, the first day of class, an interesting little anecdote. You know, I came in bright eyed, going to my first day of work at the State Department, where I was going to be involved in the great events of the world that were going on. And, in fact, great events were underway, because the 1973 Arab-Israeli War started just exactly the day before I started my Foreign Service class. You know, here I was, a young man going straight into the center of foreign affairs and world excitement, and what was everyone talking about at class that first morning? Well, the World Series, of course. So that was an interesting jolt to me.

Q: Did you get any impression, any thoughts about of how you were indoctrinated into the Foreign Service?

EICHER: You know, I thought it was great. At the time, it seemed to me to be a class that was extremely relaxed, that was aimed at getting to know the other people in the class, people who were going to be your friends and colleagues for the next twenty or thirty years. There was a lot of emphasis on getting along and enjoying yourself more than on heavy study. There were a lot of lectures on how the State Department worked and a lot of administrative orientation. But, there was very little practical training in the A-100. When I got to my first assignment, I didn't really know how an embassy worked or, for example, how to write a State Department report.

They did, of course, give us all the language aptitude exam, as I guess they continue to give to everybody. We had some real stars in our class. I think we had several people get 80, which was the highest score possible. I pulled a 61 and at the time they told you if you wanted to learn a hard languagArabic or Chinese or somethinyou should have at least 60. So, their advice to me was that well, with 61, if my life's goal was to learn Arabic or Chinese, they would let me do it but they would not recommend it since I would have a harder time than most people in those classes. That was never really my life's goal, so I did not opt for that. I already spoke French and passed that with a 3/3, so they let me through on that. I didn't have to do any further language training and wasn't required to bid on jobs that required language training.

At the time, the assignment process was also a little bit mysterious. They have changed it so many times with different entering classes and continue to do so. What they did for us was to give us all a list of all of the posts we could choose from and ask us all to give a list of six choices. There were domestic assignments on the list as well overseas posts; there was no requirement at the time to serve overseas for two tours before doing domestic assignments. In any event, I wanted to go abroad, not stay in Washington. So, we all submitted our bid lists and, through some mysterious process, we would probably be assigned one of them or perhaps not, depending on what we chose and what they needed most to fill. There was not the requirement then that you had to do a consular tour, as there is now. There was, however, a preponderance of consular jobs on the list. There were also three jobs in Vietnam on the list to be filled. They all, I think, at least two of them, ended up being filled by fellows who had been there before in the military and who were not too unhappy to go back. I remember giving a lot of thought with my wife to filling out our list. I can't remember quite what was on it but after I had filled it out and submitted it, they came back with a couple of additional choices, one of which was Suva, Fiji, and that was very intriguing to me since I had joined partly with the view of seeing strange and distant places.

So, you know, I spoke to the assignments people about Fiji and they said, "Oh, you know, this would be great for you, a perfect kind of place, interesting, quiet, and especially good because you're married and you have a small child. It's a good place to get your feet wet and do a lot of different things because it's a small post." So, we put it down and promptly were assigned there. Interestingly, I spoke to one of my colleagueas far as I know he was the only other one who expressed an interest in Fijand he had also gone and spoken to the same people about it and their advice to him was, "Fiji? You don't want to go to Fiji. That's way out in the middle of no place. Nothing is happening there." And they assigned him someplace else. Clearly, they had some notions of how to make everybody happy by giving them the assignment of their dreams and guiding you to where they wanted you to go and making you feel like you have gotten, maybe, the best of the deal. Anyway, that was interesting.

I didn't have to get too much training to go to Fiji. One of the required training courses for everyone was area studies but the closest area studies to Fiji was Southeast Asian area studies, so they assigned me to that, in their wisdom. I went for two weeks and learned about Vietnam, which was all that Southeast Asian studies were about at the time and never heard a word about the Pacific Islands. They also gave me the consular course because I would be assigned as vice consul as well as third secretary to Fiji. That was before the days of "ConGen Roslyn," so the course was mainly lectures on visa and citizenship laws and procedures. There was little or no effort to give really practical, role-playing kind of training.

Interestingly, although the position I was going to in Fiji was designated as a consular slot, the chargï¿½ wrote me and asked me to take the economic/commercial course because he really wanted to assign me, not to consular work, but to do economic and commercial work. So, here I was a political officer going off to a consular slot to do economic and commercial work. But that was okay. In addition to the consular course, they ran me through an economics course. I think it was a six-week's economic/commercial course. I had not taken much economics in my university, so for me a lot of it was very new with heavy textbooks and charts and math.

Q: Samuelson, I suppose.

EICHER: Yes, Samuelson, exactly. Things that I wasn't familiar with. They were trying to make sure everybody had the equivalent of a degree in economics within six weeks and, of course, the commercial side of it as well, how to promote trade and American exports and so forth. They sent us off for a week to work at a Department of Commerce field office someplace in the country that was dealing with foreign trade. I was lucky enough to volunteer for and get San Francisco. So I went off for a week in San Francisco, a rather nice introduction to the Foreign Service and, in fact, it was the first time I've ever been on the West Coast. It was very nice indeed.

During the A-100 class, I remember they sent us off to a retreat at one point, in West Virginia. They had a little lodge of some kind that they sent us off to for two or three days to play war games and things like that.

Q: How did your wife respond both to the idea of the Foreign Service and then to Suva and all that?

EICHER: Well, Suva was very much a joint decision, so she was happy about that. She also liked the idea of the Foreign Service. She had also grown up moving around overseas. I mentioned that we had met in seventh grade at the American School in Paris and then ended up again at the same high school in Connecticut, which is where we really got together. Her father was with IBM world trade and mine was with Conoco, so both ended up at the company headquarters not far from each other in the New York area and we ended up at the same high school in Westport. She was, I think, very excited to be going out and starting to see the world anwe can get into it more lateshe eventually joined the Foreign Service herself and is now still a Foreign Service specialist in human resources. She's still in the Foreign Service more than ten years after I retired. So, I'm actually a "dependent spouse" and have been for our last couple of overseas assignments.

Q: How did you get to Suva?

EICHER: We flew by way of a stop in Hawaii, and then flew Honolulu-Suva. We stopped a couple of days in Hawaii to enjoy it there; we had never been before. I always thought one of the great things about the Foreign Service was that you could stop places on your moves around. There are a lot of different places in the world that we have seen for a weekend as we passed through on the way to an assignment someplace else, or on the way back, which was always fun. Particularly in the early days, you know, we couldn't afford to stay anywhere more than a couple of days. The State Department would pay for a one night rest stop and anything else was on you. In fact, Suva was one of the last places the Foreign Service could still theoretically travel to by ship. The Congress had passed the American carrier regulations and one of the last American passenger ships was still doing the South Pacific route from California. It was a cruise ship, of course, which went rarely and the timing was wrong for the trip out. Even coming back we missed it. In retrospect, we regretted that a lot since the timing coming back was just a couple of weeks off. But, being in my first post, I guess, maybe I didn't have the gumption to insist that I could leave a couple of weeks earlier than they wanted me to.

Q: You were in Suva from when to when?

EICHER: From 1974 through 1975. We must've gotten there in January of 1974, just four months after I joined the Foreign Service, and stayed until December of 1975, so we were there two full years.

Q: Tell me about Suva, Fiji. What was the situation there and of course this is a place that quite frankly most people know little about. What was going on when you got there?

EICHER: Well, first of all, it was at the time the smallest American Embassy in the worll was the big expansion from three to four Americans at the embassand it covered the biggest consular district in the world, which was mainly fish, but we covered everything from what at the time was the British Solomon Islands Protectorate in the west to Tahiti in French Polynesia in the east. So, it was this huge district to be covered by four people out of Suva. Suva was, in fact, a very small and out-of-the-way place, just as people think of it, and maybe even more so at the time. Suva itself was isolated not only in the South Pacific but also within Fiji. The international airport was in Nadi on the other side of the big island; it was either a flight or a four-plus hour drive away from Suva at the time. The roads were generally unpaved still, so most people would fly in from Nadi to Suva, in a smaller plane which took about half an hour. We landed in Nadi about three in the morning or something like that, all your inconvenient travel times. We perhaps had not been advised as well as we should. The flight to Suva wasn't going to be until seven in the morning or something like that, and we hadn't booked ourselves a hotel in Nadi because no one told us to and we didn't realize it would be paid for as part of our travel costs since we had already stopped in Honolulu. We didn't realize that Nadi wasn't a real airport, in the American sense; in those days it was just a tiny building without even a real waiting room for people getting off flights. There were no chairs, no air conditioning. So, the three of umy wife and son and just sort of wandered across the street and sat on a grassy knoll in a field and watched our first Fijian sunrise. It was very pretty and we were happy enough, on our first Foreign Service adventure, but all the workers at the airport thought we were crazy, I guess; Westerners go to hotels, they don't sit in a field waiting hours for a plane. Eventually, we did get on the plane to Suva and were we were met at the airport by the chargï¿½, Vance Hall, and his wife, Julia, and taken to the Grand Pacific Hotel, which was a nice, old, colonial structure right on the water in Suva.

Q: Big veranda and all?

EICHER: Big veranda, high ceilings, you know, very colonial style. We only stayed there a few days before they moved us to more modest accommodations, not that the Grand Pacific was any great shakes. But, it was going to be a long hotel stay. Since we were a new addition to the embassy, there was no housing available for us and we had to start a search, which took quite some time.

In terms of the politics of it, Fiji was a former British colony, now independent and in its own way kind of a superpower among the many tiny South Pacific countries and islands. It was really much bigger and more significant than any of its major neighbors, most of which were, in fact, even still colonies at the time, so Fiji was significant in that sense. The U.S. ambassador was resident in New Zealand and he had four hats, as ambassador to Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa, as well as New Zealand. Tonga was under the Fiji embassy, as were most of the Pacific Islands, but Western Samoa for some reason was under the embassy in New Zealand, I guess because of the flight connections or something. The Ambassador was a political appointee, Armistead Selden, a former congressman from Alabama, who would come up once every six months and kiss babies and slap people on the back and make a good impression and then disappear again. So, from that point of view it was a perfect arrangement where you didn't really have an ambassador to worry about.

The American Embassy when I got there was also an interesting place. It also had a very colonial kind of feeling. It was upstairs on the main shopping street of Suva, Cumming Street, which was a very small street full of duty-free shops. Fiji was a duty-free port and tourists from Australia would come in and would buy their cameras and stereo equipment, and so the street was just full of these little Indian run duty-free stores. And, above one of them in an old building, up a narrow staircase between two other entrances, was the American Embassy, which was just two rooms, one little private office for the chargï¿½ and then one quite large room where the other three Americans sat at one end and the four local employees, as we called them at the time, sat at the other end. A ceiling fan turned above us and it was quite easy to imagine that we were working there a century earlier than we were. There was a small walk-in vault which was sort of around the corner where the nationals couldn't see into it, not that there was anything to see. There were no communications. In order to send telegrams, we had to go down to the local cable and wireless office and send them off as commercial cables. If we wanted to send classified telegrams, we had a little machine which allowed us to encrypt them and still, we would have to carry the encrypted telegrawhich was in five letter nonsense words by the time it was encryptedown to the local cable and wireless office, where the clerks would raise their eyebrows if they were new employees. The old ones got used to it and would take the telegram and transmit it to Washington or wherever we were sending it to. This was a very interesting introduction to the Foreign Service, not quite what I had expected. It was so complicated to send and receive classified cables that we didn't do it often. Most of our reporting was still by letter or "airgram," which was the old State Department reporting format where you wrote hard copies of reports on special letterhead, numbered and recorded them, and then transmitted them by diplomatic pouch.

Q: Let's talk about the government. What was it like?

EICHER: It was a parliamentary democracy. There was a governor general who was appointed by the Queen but who was, in fact, a Fijian, a chief from one of the prominent families. There was a prime minister who was also a Fijian, Ratu Sir Kamasese Mara. These were chiefly Fijians who were from the best families and part of the ethnic Fijian nobility. But, there was an underlying tension because the country's population at the time was more than half ethnic Indian. These were Indians who had been brought in during the previous century as indentured laborers for the sugar plantations and who had stayed and prospered, sugar being the biggest export from Fiji. People got along pretty well with each other, but it was an extremely ethnically conscious society, not in a nasty way, but just the way people identified each other sort of struck us. If somebody was walking down the road, he wasn't a boy, he was a Fijian boy or an Indian boy, or a Chinese boy. At the time, I think about 51 or 52% of the population was Indian, about 40 or 45% was ethnic Fijian and then there were also Chinese and European communities. The Fijians were still in control of the political power at the time. The Indians did have politicians but most of them were in opposition. Fiji had a little parliament, which I attended a couple of times and found to be kind of eye opening and amusing in that it was almost sort of a caricature of the British Parliament, with constant catcalls and jibes across the divided floor of the very small parliament chamber. There was an army, which was really at the time regarded more as kind of a toy soldier army. They would parade on ceremonial occasions; they would wear bright red shirts and white sulus, which are the skirts that the Fijian men wore. The main activity the army seemed to have was going down and welcoming cruise ships in their colorful uniforms with a brass band.

The overall feeling, on the political side, was that it was a new government, a very moderate government that was just starting to feel its way in the world. It had just gotten its independence three or four years before, in 1970, I think. There was still a colonial feel about the place. A lot of the senior civil servants were still British, including the Secretary to Government, I think the title was, who was someone we dealt with a lot. The government was very pro-Western, not in the sense that it was a cheerleader for Western policies or causes, but that nobody even seemed to consider a different approach. Even though this was still the height of the Cold War there was no thought at all that Fiji would take the other side.

Q: They hadn't moved yet into the sort of peace keeping work, as they are now?

EICHER: Well, they are now. In fact, I think in retrospect, although I could only follow it from a distance, this probably contributed to a lot of the later coups and changes within Fiji. The army did go off first to Lebanon as peacekeepers, where they were in UNIFIL and they discovered that, you know, armies are powerful, armies are real, armies are in charge of governments, especially here in the Middle East. And so, they went back home and took over their government. This was really extremely sad. And there still are a lot of Fijian troops in the Middle East with the UN and I think they've been some other places as well. But that came later. At the time the army was not political. And it was very sad for us to see it change later, because during our time it was so peaceful and democratic.

But, even when we were there, you could see that the Indians were unhappy. I'm not pretending that it was a perfect situation. There were some discriminatory laws, for example. A lot of the land in Fiji was in tribal trust and could not be sold and this therefore made it very difficult for the Indians to become landowners. And, the Indians in general, as a community, tended to be looking to leave Fiji. The ethnic Fijians were certainly not looking to leave in any significant numbers. And so you had Indians in general trying to get to Australia, New Zealand or to the United States and a lot of them succeeded in doing that, to the extent that now I believe that the Fijians are solidly in the majority and the population might be down to about 40% Indian. But the ethnic troubles remain. Even when we were there, the ethnic situation was not really troublesompeople got alonbut it was the big underlying political issue in Fiji even then. It was clear that there was a potential for real political tension. Fiji was not a melting pot; the two communities were very separate. It was, of course, the racial divide that eventually led to the military coups, after the Indians finally won an election and formed a government. The army was overwhelmingly ethnic Fijian.

Q: Was there much intermarriage?

EICHER: Some, but not a lot. You know, it wasn't a rare thing but neither was it a terribly common thing. It wasn't frowned on, but it just didn't happen very much.

Q: Somehow the mix sounds like it wasn't as deep there as it was in some places.

EICHER: I think it probably wasn't. Most Fijians still lived in villages and even the ones in towns still had very close ties to their villages, which might be on other islands of the Fiji group. It was very much the Third World, not the grinding, extreme poverty you see in Africa or South Asia, but still very underdeveloped conditions, with many places not having electricity, no paved roads outside the main towns, and many of the houses still built of sticks and thatched roofs. Those kinds of traditional Fijian houses were called bures and could be very picturesque, but they could also look very run down and unpleasant to live in. Conditions for the Indians were generally better, although a lot of them were still manual laborers in the sugar fields, which is extremely tough work.

The Indians as well as the Fijians tended to be rather communal. There would still be a lot of Indian festivals that would go on which were interesting. Moving to Fiji was initially liberating for many of the Indians. There were many middle-to-lower caste Indians who found that in Fiji the caste system didn't apply. A lot of the new arrivals just changed their names, their family names, and suddenly it looked like they came from much more significant families or higher castes. In fact, our best friends and next-door neighbors were the Maharajs, which of course, is about as high as you can get in India, but they acknowledged that their family probably had not been Maharajs when they left India for Fiji.

Q: On the staff at the embassy, was it mostly Indian?

EICHER: No, it was mostly Fijian, as matter of fact. I don't think there were any Indians. I'm not sure why, since the Indians tended to be better educated. I guess it probably developed the way it does at so many embassies, that when someone gets a position their friends and relatives seem to get in after them. There was at least one who was mixed race, Fijian and Chinese, I think. But remember, we're only talking bout four people; it was a very small staff.

Q: It's interesting because from what little I know about Polynesia, there's a tendency by sort of the Indians and the Chinese to take over many commercial or office type jobs and the native population is almost brushed aside.

EICHER: That was very much the case in Fiji, certainly. The commercial side and even the white collar side in general was overwhelmingly Indian. There was also a handful of Chinese small businessmen. Maybe it was a deliberate decision by the embassy to hire some Fijian's. Maybe it just happened that way. I don't know what the history of it was but we did end up with Fijians.

The Embassy made a move while I was there. We moved out of our little colonial-style office on Cumming Street down to a new high-rise along the waterfront; I guess it must have been six or seven stories tall and this was very much a skyscraper by Fijian standards, there were only a few buildings that big in Suva. The New Zealand Embassor High Commission, I guess it wahad the top two floors of the building and the U.S. Embassy had half the floor below that, which I guess shows the extent of how the U.S. official presence in Fiji compared even to a country the size of New Zealand. It was a modern office building, just constructed. I got my own office for the first time, which was a very nice office with a big picture window looking out on this gorgeous view over the bay. I could see all Suva from up there; it was great. I understand the Embassy has moved at least a couple of times since then and they are in new quarters now. Certainly the building we were in was far, far below the security standards we insist on for embassies these days. In fact, there was no security at all. No Marines, of course, and not even a local guard or a code on the door. Anyone could just walk in. There was a small, walk-in vault in the back that did have a door with a code, but aside from that, there were no barriers or locks at all between the entrance of the Embassy and all the offices inside.

Q: Was there a New Zealand or Australia or British presence in Fiji at the time?

EICHER: There was a very small diplomatic community. I mentioned that the New Zealand High Commission was right upstairs from us. The Australians were by far the largest diplomatic presence there, followed by the New Zealanders. The British were very influential and had a High Commission, as well as still having a lot of Brits in senior government positions. The Chinese were there and the Indians, of course, were there. The Indian High Commissioner was the dean of the diplomatic corps and had been there for many years; his wife used to give afternoon teas regularly for the diplomatic ladies, which my wife enjoyed. The French set up a one-person office while we were there. That was the extent of the diplomatic community. There were several very young Australian and New Zealand diplomats on their first postings, just about our age, who we got to be very good friends with.

Q: You mentioned the Chinese.

EICHER: It was the Taiwanese, now that you ask. At the time, the U.S. hadn't recognized Red China yet, and neither had the Fijians. So they were friendly Chinese, who we would sometimes see socially, although we didn't have much to do with them from a professional perspective. Most of the diplomatic offices in Suva were really high commissions rather than embassies because they represented Commonwealth countries. There were also a few other diplomatic representatives who were accredited to Fiji but resident elsewhere. You know, you might get a visitor from time to time, say a German ambassador resident in Australia, but not very often.

The economy depended even back then to a large extent on tourism. Tourists were overwhelmingly Australians which, again, was nice from our perspective because instead of having the "ugly American" image, the ones who got in trouble were usually the Australians and so the "ugly Australian" image prevailed. Americans tended to be very well-liked, still. We didn't see very many Americans. Fiji is quite remote and at the time it was quite expensive for American tourists to get to, so Americans looking for tropical islands would usually end up going to either the Caribbean or Tahiti or somewhere closer. Not many Americans came to Fiji, and those who did were usually well off and went to the big tourist hotels along the south coast, so we didn't see many of them in Suva. I remember only once being marginally involved in looking for a missing Americawho eventually turned up in another countrand I don't think we ever had an American in jail or otherwise in trouble during my two year tour. There were a very few prominent Americans who visited from time to timfor example, Raymond Burr owned a small island therbut we wouldn't normally see them. Raymond Burr raised orchids on his islanorchids grew all over Fiji, along with all kinds of other beautiful flowerand once he sent a big bunch of orchids to the embassy.

Q: Before we move to the outlying islands and your impressions of that, what were you doing?

EICHER: It's interesting because, you know, I thought I was extremely busy at the time. It was my first real job out of university and I would go to the office at whatever time in the morning and leave at whatever the designated time was in the afternoon. I don't think overtime was ever an issue in Fiji. It seemed to me I was very busy. For the first 18 months I was doing mainly economic/commercial work. My first big taswhich still sticks in my mind because it was my first big task in the Foreign Servicwas putting together the annual "economic trends report," which was a report that the embassy was supposed to do once a year but which had not been done on Fiji for a very long time, if ever. I remember spending quite some time digging through different government papers and reports and dealing with other embassies and some businessmen to put together this report, and then presenting the draft to the chargï¿½, having no idea what his reaction would be, and being quite pleased that he liked it very much and sent it off to Washington with practically no changes. It was published, as these reports were to be distributed to the business community, so my very first publication was a ten or twenty page report on economic trends in Fiji.

The other commercial work was trade promotion. There were a couple of programs we carried out in coordination with the Department of Commerce. One was called a WTDa world trader data reporwhich supplied information about local companies to American companies who wanted to know about them before entering into a business or trading agreement. I would have to check with local banks and others to get information about the companies to send in, their creditworthiness and their reputation, and such. There was another kind of standard report that I can't remember the acronym for, which was aimed at getting American exporters together with local companies. When we got an inquiry from a local firm that was interested in importing any kind of American product, I'd get the details and send them off to Washington, which had a huge register of firms interested in exporting just about everything; the American firm would then send information and offers directly to the Fijian firm. For example, a lot of the local Indian shops wanted sporting equipment, American sporting equipment, and so I would talk with them about what they wanted, and would look up some complicated code numbers, put it all into a telegram, send it back and it would go to the distributors who would send out their offers. The same thing for joint ventures. I remember trying to help out some company that was trying to start a joint venture to produce mattresses but never succeeded; American mattresses were too expensive. But I do remember some of the sporting goods sales. Things seemed to go well and the little Indian shops that sold tennis rackets and scuba equipment and so forth seemed to be very pleased and excited with the number of inquiries and offers they got from American companies to sell their things there. In general, Fiji was a very small market and I'm not sure the sales amounted to much in real terms. We weren't involved in any big sales like airplanes. And the big American investorsay in hoteldidn't seem to want or need the Embassy's help.

It was very rare for an American salesman actually to come to Fiji during my time there. I remember one came trying to sell turkey tails. This seemed kind of strange to me, but he talked a lot about how they were almost all meat and very good. I never saw him again so I don't think he had much luck.

Since it was such a small embassy I also got involved in some other kinds of activities and reporting and did some consular work, mainly signing non-immigrant visas which were pretty much processed by our local employees.

Q: Sometimes in a place like Suva you end up with a lot of Iranians or other people who come in visa shopping. Did that happen?

EICHER: Practically not at all since we were so out-of-the-way and hard to get to. We had a fair sized non-immigrant visa business from Tahiti, since we were responsible for French Polynesia, and this would be handled through a system of travel agents. There were two or three of them, but one in particular, who would fly to Fiji every couple of months with a suitcase full of French passports of Tahitian residents who wanted to take their vacation in Los Angeles. He would park himself in a hotel for a couple of days while we worked our way through these couple of hundred passports that he'd brought with him. Then, once we issued the visas, he would take the passports and go back to Tahiti again. It was rare to turn down a visa applicant from Tahiti. Unfortunately, we were not actually allowed to visit Tahiti in an official capacity. The French considered that, of course, Tahiti was an integral part of France, so it should be handled by the embassy in Paris rather than the American Embassy in Suva. So, we could never make official visits to Tahiti but my wife and I, and the kids, did make a point of stopping there for a couple of days on the way back to the United States at the end of our tour. We were taken around and treated very nicely by one of these travel agents for whom we had been doing visas for the past couple of years. They kept saying, "Oh, you've got to stay longer and I can fly you to Bora Bora and put you up out there," but of course, being first tour people we didn't know how to work any of this in advance and, in any event, it probably would not have been appropriate to accept that kind of gift. I don't know if it would have been legal at the time or not but it certainly would not have been appropriate to accept it.

So I did do the consular work for the last six months I was there. When the consular officer left, after I had been in Suva for 18 months, I was shifted to consular duties and the outgoing consular officer's replacement, who was a bit more senior than me, took over the economic/commercial duties.

Before I get to consular, I should also mention I also do remember following a political convention, the so-called political convention of Fiji's ruling party, the name of which I forget. But I remember going down to attend the convention and even to my 24-year-old inexperienced eyes it really was quite an amateurish and unimpressive kind of gathering. I guess my report must have been a bit snide, because I remember the chargï¿½ teasing me about it. I also did some low level political reporting on other issues, some of it on the basis of newspaper reports from other island groups we covered. For example, we'd get the French language newspapers from Tahiti and sometime they'd have news that was worth summarizing and sending on, for example, about nuclear testing. That allowed me to keep up my French, even though we were at an English language post. And I did reporting about developments in Tonga, whenever I visited there.

Most of our reports would be sent to Washington by "airgram," which was the standard reporting format at the time. We used cables relatively sparingly, not that we had a whole lot to report. I remember the chargï¿½ being delighted when we hit 100 cables in a year. We did get a telex machine installed when we moved to the new embassy office, so we no longer had to take cables down to the cable and wireless office for transmission. The telex was linked directly to the U.S. embassy in New Zealand and all our cable communications went through there. We also got a very small classified pouch every two weeks. The diplomatic courier would come all the way to Suva and we would take turns meeting him or her at the hotel on a weekend to pick up the pouch and then go lock it in the vault.

There were also endless other little jobs that you might not get at a big embassy. For example, I remember going with the chargï¿½ to the Suva garbage dump to burn classified papers. Literally, we just put them in a pile and set a match to them and then stood and watched until we were sure they were consumed. There was no shredder at the embassy; I'm not sure shredders even existed yet. There was a small incinerator that was shipped in at some point to use for burning classified, but for some reason it couldn't be hooked up. So, we went to the dump to burn classified. I'm sure that was an experience none of my entering classmates had.

As to consular work, when I switched from economic/commercial to consular, I started doing a lot more of the passports coming in from Tahiti and did some immigrant visas as well. There were a fair number of Indians who were eligible to immigrate to the U.S., through family connections, so those took some work. When I started doing consular work almost full time it had been about a year and a half since I had taken the consular course and I had never really done most of the tasks before. None of the other officers at the embassy at that point had ever really done much consular work either, so they couldn't offer much advice. I remember spending hours sweating over the consular manuals and the FAMs (Foreign Affairs Manuals) whenever anything strange would come up and, you know, making my best judgment and then six weeks later getting something back from Washington saying, "Well, next time you ought to do it this way." I didn't like the consular work very much. I hated denying visas to people, which we had to do frequently, in particular with Indians who wanted non-immigrant visas. I remember a couple of instances where people had come in who had criminal records, which they had lied about on their applications. I struggled at great length over whether these were "crimes involving moral turpitude," which is what the U.S. statute said would be prohibited. But what exactly constitutes moral turpitude was never clearly defined in any of our consular manuals. In at least one immigrant visa case in which a whole family was applying for visas, a man had clearly neglected to inform his wife that he had a criminal record, which was also a rather awkward situation. I did consular work as my main job for about six months and although I didn't much care for it, it was certainly not onerous. Fiji was not a visa mill by any means. I am quite certain I must've had time to do other kinds of work at the same time I was doing the consular work.

Q: What about Tonga? Tonga only came on, you might say, the world radar when Queen Elizabeth was crowned. I mean, the Queen of Tonga came, a huge woman and very personable. During your time what was happening in Tonga?

EICHER: Tonga was an amazing place. I visited every six months or so. When you flew in on one of the little inter-island planes you could see the whole main island from the plane as you came in. It was that small, although even Tonga was fairly large by South Pacific standards. It was still an absolute monarchy. King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV was the king. He was a huge Tongan, one of the biggest people I had ever met. He stood six foot three or four or more and must have weighed well over 300 pounds. Tongans, and Polynesians in general, are enormous people. There is kind of a general misimpression that the lithe Tahitian beauty is what the Polynesians look like. In fact, I think that's really more of the East Asian, Chinese, immigrant blood that makes for those slim builds. If you look more at the Gauguin paintings and so forth, at how the Tahitians looked 100 ago, they were very big people. The Samoans were also very big. Fiji is right on the border of Melanesia and Polynesia; the Melanesians are darker and aren't so big. So Fiji had both big and small people, although most were on the large side; the prime minister and the governor general were very large; Fijians tended to be big people but not all were.

In fact, I had heard an interesting theory that the Polynesians were big because of "survival of the fattest." As they were taking their canoe trips across the Pacific discovering new lands, the thin ones would die off and the "thin genes" would die off with them. The fat ones would survive and prosper, so you ended up with very heavy people. I have no idea whether it's true or not but the story has stuck with me.

So, you did have the enormous king in Tonga. He was apparently a sight to behold in his younger days as he would ride in on a surfboard. There is an extremely funny picture of his visit to Japan with his wife, who was also quite big, and the two are standing there together with tiny Emperor Hirohito and his wife and it's a very Mutt and Jeff kind of look. They said the king couldn't fit into an airplane seat, so they had to make special arrangements when he flew.

I did get a chance to meet the king. I accompanied the ambassador to Tonga, Ambassador Selden, on one trip and we had an audience with the king which was extremely interesting. We went to the royal palace, which was basically an old wooden Victorian house, the kind you might find in any American city. There was not a lot of ceremony but there were a few guards and butlers and so forth, who ushered you in to see the king. They told you beforehand that you would be served champagne and the king would be served orange squash, a kind of sweet orange drink, and when the king finished his orange drink, it was time for you to leave. So we sat down, Ambassador Selden and his wife and I, and chatted with the king. We were told the meeting would be about half an hour and after about forty-five minutes, the orange juice was still there and we were looking at our watches and the ambassador said something about, "Well, I guess we should be going" but the king just kept on talking and asking questions. After an hour the juice was still there and at this point, we were late for whatever else was on the schedule, which certainly couldn't have been as important as the king, but the ambassador was rather nervous and so we finally took our leave. I don't think he had finished his orange drink yet. I hope we didn't cause a diplomatic incident with that. I can't even remember what we talked about although I am sure I wrote a report. At some point I should do some Freedom of Information Act requests and get some of these.

Q: Did we have any interest, I know at one point in some places we had the basic policy of strategic denial, which was to keep the Soviets from setting up in ports which might be used for military purposes, or even ship visits, but was there anything like that going on?

EICHER: Very, very little. There was no sign of Soviets in the South Pacific at that point that I can recall at all. We did have the occasional U.S. ship visit, which was rare but I certainly remember at least one for which the embassy gave a large cocktail party. It may have been the Fourth of July eveand probably at the Grand Pacific Hotel, although I don't swear to thawhere one of the officers all dressed in his white uniform cut a cake with his saber, much to the delight of the many guests. In fact, I remember one of my early diplomatic faux pas surrounded that reception. With an embassy the size of Suva, everybody was enlisted to write the invitations. For whatever reason, we didn't have them printed out. We just used the standard invitations that had blanks on them and we had to fill in the date and time and "in honor of" and so forth on the top of the invitations. So, everybody had a lot of those to do and I, apparently, filled out one to His Worship the Mayor of Suva and put the wrong date on it and His Worship showed up at the hotel a day or two early for the reception. You know, everybody just laughed it off, the mayor arriving for a party two days early. The mayor of Suva, "His Worship," as mayors are called in British cities, was not really a big thing, since Suva was a city of only about 60 or 70,000 people. We're really talking about a small town. So it was not really a big deal but, of course, I was mortified and one of my colleagues at the embassy had great fun reminding me often about the incident.

So we did have a ship visit. One of the issues that was going on at the time was the law of the sea negotiations. And, in this, in fact, Fiji was of some significance. I wouldn't want to overplay it, but there were a whole range of issues including free passage and territorial waters and archipelagos and delineating maritime boundaries and others. We did get involved in some of that, in passing U.S. positions back and forth to the Fijians on these different aspects the law of the sea. I learned quite a bit about the law of the sea.

Another big political issue out there at the time was the French nuclear tests, which were going on in French Polynesia. The rest of the South Pacific was just really up in arms about that. Of course, it was far away from Fiji and the French did what they wanted, and there was not much the island countries could do about it, but it gave the French a very bad name.

Q: Was that at the time when some French special forces blew up the Rainbow Warrior?

EICHER: That came much later, long after I had left. You know, there really had not been those vigorous environmental protesters back at the time in the same way as now. We are talking in 1974-75. But the nuclear tests were quite an issue. And, I guess, the other general issue that was going on was the process of decolonization, which was starting to make its way across the South Pacific. You already had Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa as independent and in the years that followed, almost all of the islands were to become independent. They had put together a political body, the South Pacific Forum, which met every year. There were actually two different organizations that met. It gets complicated. There was the South Pacific Commission, which included the outside powers such as the United States and the British and the Australians and so forth plus all of the island countries, both independent and still under colonial rule. Separately, there was an organization of the independent islands, called the South Pacific Forum, which was making a few radical, anti-colonial kinds of statementor what appeared to us as sucbut which were, in fact, quite mild and not at all threatening to the relationship with the West. So, I did attend a couple of South Pacific Commission meetings, which got me to Noumea, New Caledonia, another French territory.

Q: Did you get to the Solomon Islands?

EICHER: Only to pass through. At the time it was still the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. I stopped in Honiara, the capital, once to change planes, en route to a big South Pacific Commission meeting in Nauru.

Q: Isn't that just a mountain of lava or something?

EICHER: Pretty much. It's an island of mineral phosphator at least it waand the whole island is just eleven or twelve miles around. At the time, it was quite a rich island because of its phosphate but it was sort of digging itself out of existence. They built a new hotel complex and conference center just specifically to host the South Pacific Commission. I was made a member of the three or four person U.S. delegation, along with the desk officer from Washington and a delegation leader who was a minor politician from Hawaii. It was two weeks in Nauru, which is quite a long time to spend in Nauru. But, it was interesting, I recall, although I can no longer remember what the issues we were discussing at the South Pacific Commission. Nauru, however, definitely sticks in my mind as being small, one small road going around the outside of the island, one small airstrip down the middle, one hotel which they built specifically for the conference, one nice conference center. I was pleased with the experience, which was my first multilateral conference; perhaps that helped increase my interest in a UN job many years later. I ended up with my photograph in National Geographic, only you can't tell it's me. They had somebody there covering Nauru at the time of the conference. He took a photograph of the plenary of the conference, I'm just a pinprick on the photograph, even though there weren't all that many people at the conference, perhaps a hundred at the most. The hotel wasn't big enough for everybody, so we ended up sharing rooms with other members of our delegation. Every delegation was assigned a chauffeur from among the local population, which was quite wealthy by South Pacific standards and many of them had their own automobiles. The guy who took us around had a Lincoln Continental and I asked him "what do you do when it breaks down?" There wasn't any sign of any car repair shops there. He said, "Oh, I send it back to Australia to be serviced." So they had money coming in. They still had pigs running around loose and so forth, like on the other South Pacific islands, but the houses were made of stone instead of twigs and generally had tin roofs and were slightly more prosperous looking. Supposedly, the government was putting the phosphate money into good investments in Australia so that they would be able to live after the phosphate ran out. At one point, the largest building in Melbourne, I think, was an office skyscraper called Nauru House. In general, however, I understand that the investments did not work out and now the phosphate is gone. Some of the investments went south and I don't know what that has done to the poor people of Nauru.

I remember the president of Nauru was a fellow named Hammer de Robert, who I met at a reception they gave for the delegates. It was a heady experience for me because he was the first president I had ever met, although he was the president of an island thirteen miles in circumference with a population of probably 5,000 or something. I met him under curious circumstances. I had never had sushi before and raw fish was not something that appealed to me as a concept. I was standing there with two or three other delegates chatting, as you do at these diplomatic receptions, and up walks the president himself with a tray of sushi in his hands saying, "I have just had this flown in from Japan. Wouldn't you like some?" So, I had my first sushi, which to my surprise was actually quite good, as much as I hated to admit it. Ah, the things I've done for my country. Anyway, I met my first president and it was all a very interesting experience.

Back to your original question, I passed through the Solomon Islands on my circuitous route to Nauru. There are not a lot of flights in and out of Nauru and my route took me from Fiji to Vila in the New Hebridewhich is now Vanuatthen to Honiara and then to Port Moresby and thence to Nauru. It was an endless trip. In Honiara, we went down to the yacht club; I say "we" because on the flight from Vila to Honiara I linked up with a couple of Australians who were going to the conference. I had really wanted to go explore the city of Honiara and they got a big laugh out of that saying, "Ha, ha. There's nothing to explore here in Honiara." So, we went and sat at the yacht club and had a beer as we waited a few hours for a return to the airport to take the next plane. We did drive through Honiara and I have to admit there didn't seem to be much to see. In Port Moresby, I don't think we even left the airport.

I also did a little unusual traveling out of Nauru, which had its own airlina reflection of its mineral wealtwhich I think consisted of one plane, which was a real jet which must've held fifty or sixty people. As a little perk, the Nauruans had arranged to bring in a little band from another island to entertain the conference-goers and they invited anybody who wanted to fly along on the trip to pick them up. So, a bunch of us hopped on the plane and flew from Nauru to Ponapei to Truk and back to Nauru again and picked up the band which then entertained us at the nightly functions that they had for the conference-goers. It was quite an amazing show of hospitality that they put on for the foreigners in Nauru. I'm sure they had never had such a big group of officials from different countries there at one time before. I remember being at a dinner where they were pouring the wine for all the guests and one of the wines they poured was Blue Nun. One of the ladies at my table, when the waiter asked her "white or red" said that she would have the Blue Nun and the waiter said, "Oh, sorry ma'am. We only have white or red." It was a funny land of contrasts.

Q: Was the issue of Japanese and Soviet over-fishing an issue in that area at that time?

EICHER: I don't recall it being an issue of particular controversy, although it certainly would have come up in the context of the law of the sea negotiations. In fact, I have no doubt that, as they were claiming their two hundred mile territorial limit that was one of the issues they had in mind. In fact, the whole idea of a two hundred mile territorial limit, if you take some of these island groups and you draw what two hundred mile limits would be around them, it's really quite a significant swath of area. You can see why it was quite such an issue.

Q: I don't know how it was at the time but back in the mid-1990s I visited Ponapei for a week to talk about setting up consular operations there. Looking at this, you could see a sort of disaster looming there in that we were putting in a lot of subsidized money because it was part of our Department of Interior's responsibility, and essentially destroyed the fishing industry and there wasn't much else for people to do, other than a lot of beer drinking, and it looked like a town in the poor part of West Virginia or something. Were you seeing examples of that where you were, of modernity, sort of displacing the traditional work of people whether it be fishing or that sort of thing?

EICHER: I don't remember it quite that blatantly there but it was certainly a problem throughout the South Pacific. In Tonga for example, there was only one factory in the entire country; it produced desiccated coconut and employed very few people. That was it. Aside from that, people survived largely either on subsistence or on remittances from Tongans who were going to work in Australia and New Zealand and a little bit of tourist income. This, of course, strikes you as, you know, how did they survive before there were remittances from Australia and New Zealand? And so, whatever they were doing back then, they were apparently not doing to the same extent anymore. You know, there really are many desperately poor islands out there. You don't get the same feeling about poverty as you do in Africa, or in the Middle East or in South Asia, where I have subsequently seen such stark poverty. Maybe it didn't seem as grim because the weather is good, the fruit grows on trees, the fish are plenty and there are not so many people. You don't get the sense of desperate poverty, extreme poverty, that you get in the other places. And the people aryou know, I hate characterize national groups but as you spend enough time in the Foreign Service you can't avoid it sometimebut they do seem to be generally happy. The Fijians, in particular, were just always smiling and singing and pleasant. So yes, they were poor. Yes, many of them had practically nothing. Yes, a lot of them lived in stick houses with thatched roofs. But you didn't get the sense of "my goodness, such destitute people" that you do definitely get in a lot of other countries.

Q: How did you find social life for you and your wife there?

EICHER: It was quiet, not a lot to it. Suva, I think I mentioned, was just a small city town, 60, 70, 80,000 people tops. The paved roads ended at the end of town and if you wanted to leave Suva, you had to drive on dirt roads. There were no beaches in the Suva area and to get to the nice beaches in the south part of the island was a drive of a couple of hours over kind of nasty dirt roads. We would do that sometimes but not so often. When you did get there it was just exactly the idea you would conjure up of the South Pacific, with the beautiful white beach stretching off as far as you can see in the distance and the palm trees waving in the breeze and nobody else on the beach either direction as far as you could see. But back in Suva, it wasn't unpleasant but in a lot of ways it was your typical isolated Third World town without much going on.

There was a little group of young diplomats, mainly Australians, New Zealanders and Brits, who were about our age and just starting off on their first Foreign Service tours, who we got along quite well with. We met lots of the other Europeans. We got to know our neighbors who were Indians and some of the Fijians. It was generally a friendly kind of area, a nice place to be with a young family. My second son was born there at a tiny little Fijian hospital; a maternity hospital with six beds all in one room, no windows but just shutters that were held open with a stick. My wife was the first official American ever to have a baby in Fiji rather than being medevaced to New Zealand, which didn't have any appeal for her at all. It was interesting and exotic and, in retrospect, brave. We got to know a bunch of people who were having babies at the same time she was so that added to our circle of friends.

So, we had several groups of friends who we did things with; I don't remember feeling bored. But generally, it was quiet. I don't even remember there being a movie theater in town. The embassy had a movie projector and a very small library of short subject films and the occasional full length film that we would sometimes borrow and have friends over to watch movies.

There were very few restaurants in Suva. There was one Chinese restaurant on the main street that was called the Golden Dragon, which would seem to be the regular place that people went if you were going out. Before we left, a little American steakhouse, Biddy's, was opened. There were a couple of other places that we would go now and then but really not very much at all. There were a couple of very small, so-called department stores which were the old Australian trading companieMorris Headstrom and Burns Philwhere we would do our shopping. In Fiji, they drove on the left side of the street, a good British tradition. I remember we wanted to get seatbelts put in our car. This was when we bought a car there, in Fiji, that didn't come with seatbelts. They thought this was a very strange concept, to want seatbelts, but they finally found some and installed them for us and were very proud of having put in these bright red seatbelts that clashed with the orange-ish interior of the car.

Another event was the visit of Prince Charles. Then, he was still a very handsome young man, very popular, a national hero in Fiji, I guess just by virtue of taking the time to visit. I think it was on the Queen's birthday that he came out, so there was a grand celebration given by the governor general on the big lawn of the governor's mansion. It was quite nice.

We had a lot of Peace Corps friends as well.

Q: This sounds like a fun place to be in the Peace Corps.

EICHER: I think it was a fun place to be a Peace Corps person. In some ways, we even think that our own Fiji experience was as much Peace Corps as Foreign Service. But, there were probably a hundred Peace Corps volunteers, most of whom were just right out of university. We got to know quite a number of them, as well as getting to be very good friends with the Peace Corps staff who were based in Suva, who were also young people with young families like we were. One of the volunteers, in fact, was a friend from high school who was there as a volunteer with his wife, so that was a very interesting development. My wife and I went out to see them on another island, Levuka, which was kind of a journey away. We were adventurous and took a local bus and local ferry out to Levuka, which was a trip of several hours altogether. Being the only Europeans undertaking the trek, we got a lot of interesting looks from very friendly Fijians who always wanted to talk and always wanted to stroke our son's white-blond hair. We ended up seeing a lot Levuka, which had originally been the capital of Fiji a hundred years ago, before they moved it to Suva, and where, in fact, an early American consul had been based who died there in 1840's. We went and found his grave; it's the kind of thing we go looking for in those places. Levuka was one of Fiji's major cities, but it was a very small town. When we asked our Peace Corps friends for directions to their house from the pier where we would be landing, they laughed and said "just ask anyone where the Americans live." They were right; everyone knew.

Q: Fiji was not the center of operations during World War II. It was off to one side but there were troops based there. Did World War II have much impact and were you getting any reflections of the war?

EICHER: Not as much as I had expected, going to the South Pacific. I read Michener's Tales of the South Pacific before I went, as well as other World War II books about the South Pacific like Leon Uris's Battle Cry. You could see at the airport that there were some hangers and things which they said were left over from World War II. You even had seaplanes going in and out of Suva a little bit and occasionally people would talk about how during the war there were a lot of sea planes around. But it really, I guess, was much less a center of operations than I might have imagined for such a big island. I guess the Pacific is so big that it really was off the beaten track during the War.

Back to the Peace Corps for a moment, when I was in Nauru, my wife went to visit our Peace Corps friends on another islanthe same friends had moved to a different place because Levuka was too civilizeand they were now on a tiny little island way, way off somewhere. She had an interesting cultural experience going out there with our two little kids on a small inter-island boat that makes the rounds. They had to take all their own food and supplies and stayed in a very small village in a thatched hut. I guess having a European family there, with kids, was a first for the island. She had to make her compliments to the chief at a special dinner and was offered the dish of honor, which is to suck the eye out a fish. But, being a woman, she was able to return the honor to the chief saying, "No, no. You must do it, the honor is yours." And so she avoided that, which I have to admit, would have been a little worse than the sushi experience I was having in Nauru at the same time. I didn't know how long she was going to be out there because there is no schedule for the boats; once you're there, you just have to wait until the next boat comes. One morning the cry came up from the beach "the boat is here." Then they loaded up her stuff and got back on the boat to Suva. With that trip and her time in a village, she had a much more real Fijian experience that I ever did.

Q: Did you have any typhoons or the equivalent?

EICHER: We had one hurricane. We had to tape up the windows and sliding glass doors as a precaution against them shattering. There were also some tropical storms. Most often, however, we just had lots and lots of rain. Fiji is one of the wettest places in the world. Suva is on the wet side of Fiji and gets about 180 inches a year of rain. There were two seasons that they called "the wet season" and "the rainy season;" those were the two seasons. During one it sort of drizzled and rained all the time and during the other the days were bright and sunny and then suddenly, boom, you had a tremendous downpour and thunderstorm and then it would clear up again. There were beautiful South Pacific sunsets, beautiful stars at night. It always seemed to me that the stars are brighter in the southern hemisphere but I suppose it also had something to do with less pollution and so forth.

On the subject of typhoons, however, another of my jobs at the embassy was to be disaster relief coordinator. I drafted the embassy's first disaster relief plan. This was a long required report that had never been done before, that described the types of disasters most likely to hit the country, and provided endless details on airport and port locations and capacities, communications systems, food stocks and many other things I can't remember off hand. The idea was to have as much accurate and up-to-date information as possible on hand in case the U.S. was suddenly called on to help out with a disaster. I remember that it involved quite a bit of contact with various government ministries. As the embassy's disaster relief coordinator, I was even sent to Manila for a couple of days of disaster relief training. That was quite interesting, and got me to another new country. There was no natural disaster while I was in Fiji, but there was a big hurricane sometime after we left and I remember hearing later that my plan was, in fact, used to some extent in helping the U.S. provide some relief.

Q: Well, you left there in 1975?

EICHER: The end of 1975.

Q: Where did you go?

EICHER: Well, I received my next assignment, which was Pretoria/Cape Town, by way of Afrikaans training. So we headed back to the States, to Washington, where I was going to take five months of Afrikaans and then African area studies before heading off to South Africa.

Q: In 1976 you are taking Afrikaans?

EICHER: That's right, starting at the beginning of 1976.

Q: How long did you take it?

EICHER: I think it was twenty four weeks; it may have been twenty two weeks. I know that I had to leave the class a couple of weeks before it finished for scheduling reasons that I don't fully remember anymore.

Q: How did you find Afrikaans?

EICHER: It was fun. It was the first and only language I ever took at FSI. We had a little class of five people. It wasn't a language that a lot of people took. Only two of the five were State Department people, the other two were the defense attachï¿½ and the air attachï¿½ and his wife. Unlike the more widespread languages, there was only one Afrikaans teacher, so we had the same teacher all the time. But, it's a fairly easy language, quite similar to Dutch but different enough that it is its own language. For example, I couldn't really understand Dutch people talking to each other, although I could pick up enough to know what the subject was.

Q: How useful did you find knowing Afrikaans?

EICHER: It was quite useful. There were, in fact, only two language-designated positions in the whole State Department sections of the embassy and the three consulates in South Africone position in the political section (mine) and one in the economic sectiobecause, basically, everybody in South Africa could speak English. As the only political officer who spoke Afrikaans, I was responsible for following the parliament and the media and the press; the parliament, in particular. Parliamentary debates were very heavily in Afrikaans. I got to the point where I could quite reasonably read a newspaper or listen to the news or understand a parliamentary debate without any difficulty, so that was quite useful. In terms of everyday contacts, the Afrikaners were delighted to meet an American who would speak to them in Afrikaans. They would beam about it; it was so unusual and they were so happy that an American had taken the trouble to learn their language. Afrikaners were very nationalistic and were proud of their language. Then, after speaking with you in Afrikaans for a very few sentences, they would switch back to English, knowing that they spoke English much better than I spoke Afrikaans. So, I used it a lot, but never enough to be really comfortable in an extended conversation.

Q: You were in South Africa as a political officer from when to when?

EICHER: From the middle of 1976 to the middle of 1978. I had one of two junior positions in the political section. It was one of the half dozen embassy positions that moved back and forth between Pretoria and Cape Town. The main embassy was based in Pretoria but parliament met in Cape Town for six months of the year, so for those six months the ambassador, the DCM, the political counselor, myself, and a couple of secretaries and communicators would move from Pretoria to Cape Town, while the rest of the embassy would remain in Pretoria.

Q: Were you married?

EICHER: I was still married, just one wife for 39 years now.

Q: How did that work out, family wise?

EICHER: It was tough and that was one of the reasons that we stayed only two years in South Africa. We had two children when we arrived. One was school age, he must've been in about second grade or so, and we put him into one of the private English schools, English-language schools in Pretoria. Then, after six months we moved him to Cape Town, to another English language school when we moved down there, much to the distress of the headmaster of the Pretoria school. He thought well, of course, we should board him. They thought the idea of pulling him out was just horrifying because, of course, it was the English tradition that you put your kids in boarding school at age 6 and they fend for themselves. So, that must have been pretty tough on our son, Cameron, but he seemed to adapt to it all right and got along fine. Our third son was actually born in South Africa, in Cape Town, in Groote Schuur Hospital, the hospital where they did the first ever heart transplant operation. The move every six months must have been hard on my wife as well. She got a job with USIS in Cape Town, but didn't have one in Pretoria. On the positive side, Cape Town was a much nicer city than Pretoria. We liked it much better. So, there was some advantage to moving down. Having the cross-country trip every six months also enabled us to see much more of the country than we otherwise would have. The embassy had a house for us in each city, which remained vacant when we weren't there. It was very nice housing. The logistics of the move got easier after the first time, since you were moving back to the same house you had been in before and knew where you wanted to put everything and where to hang all the pictures.

Q: Okay, 1976. What was the situation in South Africa?

EICHER: The Soweto riots broke out in the summer of 1976, just two or three weeks before I was due to arrive in South Africa, which of course was a huge event.

Q: Could you explain what it was?

EICHER: All right. South Africa at the time was very much at the height of the apartheid system, officially called "separate development," but in fact a system of very strict segregation, that was vigorously enforced through a very harsh police apparatus. Apartheid affected all facets of lifwhere people could live, or work, or eat, or go to school or to the movies, even what public benches they could sit on. It was accompanied by a strict "pass system," under which blacks were officially not citizens of South Africa. Instead, they were assigned on a tribal basis as citizens of small, unviable "homelands" or "Bantustans," even if they had lived all their lives in a South African city. They weren't permitted in "white" areamost of the countrwithout a pass; if they didn't have a pass they could be arrested and deported to a "homeland" that they might never even have visited before. There was actually a policy of giving so-called independence to the Bantustans. One, the Transkei, was already "independent" while we were there and it was off limits to official Americans. The theory behind apartheid was that if you could assign all the blacks to be citizens of these little, independent countries that would be created, then the whites would be a majority in South Africa and the blacks would have their own little countries, where they could enjoy all the same rights and privileges that whites had in South Africa. This was a pipe dream, of course.

The Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist Party was firmly in control of the government. It saw the policy of apartheid as a solution to the racial problem in South Africa in the sense that it would strictly divide the races, reinforce tribal divisions within the black community, and create a number of these supposedly independent countries, which would provide a faï¿½ade to show the world that the blacks really had equal rights. Aside from the Bantustans, the rest of land in the countrabout 80%, I thinwould belong to the white population, which was maybe 20% of the overall population. There was also a so-called "colored" population, mixed race, and a quite large Indian population who also had their separate classifications. So, there was very strict segregation as part of an institutionalized social and political system at the time, and a very large and brutal security establishment to enforce it.

The Soweto riots of 1976 were the start of a very long period of serious urban unrest in South Africa in opposition to the system. It was the first sustained, widespread, black action in opposition to the regime. There had previously been race riots in Soweto around 1960, but they were very short-lived. The unrest following the 1976 Soweto riots continued for my entire tour of duty, on and off, and led to sharp crackdowns and further restrictions of civil liberty, the arrests of lots of leaders, and the banning of lots of organizations. It was a very tense period, politically. After the riots in Soweta suburb of Johannesburbroke out, rioting spread to other townships, or segregated suburbs, all over South Africa.

So these riots broke out in the summer of 1976, just as I was about to head out. I remember getting a call from somebody at the State Department telling me that it was important in view of the rioting that I cut my vacation short and get out there just as soon as I possibly could. Being a young officer heading to my second tour, I took this quite seriously and cut my vacation plans short. We got ourselves to South Africa and arrived to the reaction of, "Oh my goodness. We didn't expect to see you so soon." And, you know, here I was, a young officer fresh off the plane, riots in the townships all over the country, and there wasn't really very much that I could do about it, even in terms of reporting. I didn't know anybody yet. You couldn't actually go out and see what was going on because they were rioting and we were supposed to stay away. So, that was one more of those introductions to the Foreign Service. I learned to think very carefully before changing vacation plans again to rush to a post.

We faced a couple of other administrative problems on that transfer. Our trip was right after the Israeli raid on Entebe airport, in Uganda. We were flying to South Africa through Nairobi, where we took a rest stop for a day or two. When we went to board the plane from Nairobi to Johannesburg, security was so tight because of the raid on Entebe in neighboring Uganda that they would not let us take a single item of carry-on with us on the plane. That was back in the days when airport security was generally unknown, and you got on planes much the same way you got on trains, with no special screening. So, the security measures were really something. There we were with two small kids and a long flight ahead and we weren't even allowed to take a little bag of toys or books. So it was a rough flight, although our kids always traveled well. Then, when we arrived in South Africa, we were met by the political counselor, Bob Munn, with a cable from the Department that began "Due an incredible administrative error...." It turned out they had shipped our household effects to Moscow instead of Pretoria! I think I still have the cable, signed by Kissinger, who was secretary of state at the time. We could never figure out how that mistake happened, unless South Africa and the Soviet Union were next to each other on an alphabetic list and someone entered the wrong code number. Anyway, the U.S. consulate in Goetburg, Sweden, did some fancy footwork and had our effects unloaded in Sweden before the ship entered the Soviet Union, and had them transshipped to South Africa. Still, it was many months before we saw them. We had shipped everything months early in hopes that it would be waiting for us when we arrived. So, we didn't even have a crib for the baby; he quickly learned to sleep in a bed.

One first impression of South Africa was making our way through the airport in Johannesburg and seeing lots of police armed with machine guns. That was a real eye-opener at the time and a signal of the government's siege mentality. These days, there is such tight security at airports all over the world that you don't look twice at armed security people any more. Back then, however, seeing men armed with machine guns at an airport made you do a double-take.

Q: When you got there, what was your impression about the South African government and where things were going and what the U.S. was up to?

EICHER: It was kind of a tough relationship all around. The South Africans were quite favorably inclined towards the United States but, of course, apartheid was already an issue internationally and it was not a popular policy in the United States. I went out there during the Ford Administration and relations were not bad at all, but not nearly as good as the South African government would have liked. This was still the Cold War era and the South African government was rabidly anti-communist and so they thought that they should naturally be seen as a strong and close ally by the United States and other Western countries. However, because of apartheid, they were already a bit of a pariah and there were various kinds of rather mild sanctions that were imposed on South Africa, which increased during the time I was there. The sanctions included an arms embargo, which resulted in the South Africans developing their own quite effective arms industry. They built a lot of their own armaments, and according to our military guys, it was very good. They also had good ties with Israel and others, which enabled them to get arms and technology. They even cooperated with the Chinese, I believe. There was also a sports embargo, at least an informal one, of countries refusing to invite South African teams or to visit South Africa, because South African teams were segregated. Interestingly, this seemed to bother the South Africans the most because they were a very sporting nation and couldn't stand the idea that their teams were not able to compete internationally. In fact, one of the first thing to be integrated by the government was the international sporting teams, in hopes of getting some teams to play internationally. Occasionally, they would find an international team willing to come to South Africa and whenever they did, it was a big deal for them. I remember some confusion when the New Zealand "All Blacks" Rugby Team came to South Africa. The "All Blacks" got their name because they wore black uniforms, not because there were any black members of the team. The visit prompted many countries around the world to start boycotting New Zealand sports until there was some kind of an apology over the visit.

Q: Who were our ambassador and DCM when you got there?

EICHER: Our ambassador was Bill Bowdler, who was a career ambassador, a very distinguished, good fellow, who, I think, had spent most of his career in Latin America. The DCM was Bill Edmondson, who left within a few weeks after we got there and was replaced some months later by Harvey Nelson, who was an old Africa hand; we became good friends with him and his wife. Nelson was also a career officer, who went on to become ambassador in Swaziland. Edmonson, interestingly, returned as ambassador to South Africa a few weeks before the end of my assignment there, so I served with him there as both DCM and ambassador, although briefly in both cases. All three of them were good professionals and good guys. I learned a lot from working with them, especially since it was my first assignment as a political officer and I didn't really know the ropes. I certainly saw more of them than almost all the other embassy officers did, since I was also with them in Cape Town for six months a year, where the embassy had just a tiny staff, only four substantive officers, including me and the ambassador and DCM. As a result, in Cape Town, even as a very junior officer, I was attending the Ambassador's morning staff meetings.

Q: I was in INR in the late '60s and had the general impressiothis was not deep analysithat one of these days there's going to be a night of long knives in South Africa. I mean, this was kind of the idea that you can't sit on a volcano forever and reconcile it. What was the feeling about this, you know, in talking with your fellow officers?

EICHER: That was certainly the feeling I went out with. The feeling from the outside was that the situation was completely intractable and at some point it would explode or implode and you would have, indeed, an extremely bloody revolution on your hands. Of course, a low-level violent opposition was already underway through the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), the so-called liberation movementbut generally the security forces had these well in hand; the liberation movements were winning the battle of public opinion in the UN and outside the country, but they were not effective within the country. And, of course, with the Soweto riots and the spread of unrest to other urban areas around the country, some people thought this could be the beginning of the violent end. Our view at the embassy was more restrained. We knew the riots were serious and were an indication of the inherent instability built into the system, but the overwhelming preponderance of power was still with the whites; the rioters weren't going to be able to topple the government and its security apparatus, certainly not in the short term.

On the white side, most of the power was still in the hands of the older generation of Afrikaner politicians who were committed to apartheid as the solution to South Africa's racial problem. However, there was already starting to be the first signs of a split in the Nationalist Party, although "split" is probably too strong a word. The party was still solid, but what was happening was that a group of younger and more enlightened Afrikaners were emerging as a new generation within the Nationalist Party, who realized that they had a big problem and didn't have the answer. They didn't know what the answer was, yet, but they kneunlike the previous generation which was still in power at the timthat over the long term apartheid was just not going to work. They were not going to be able to corral the black population into Bantustans and have that be an effective policy. These younger politicians, many of whom were already members of parliament for the National Party, but were still backbenchers, not actually in positions of power, were called the "verligtes," an Afrikaans word meaning "enlightened," and we hoped and believed they represented the future of the Nationalist Party. They represented a chance that white politics could develop in positive way and avoid the "night of the long knives."

On the black side, beyond the ANC and PAC, you saw a very strong sense of "we want our share, we want our rights, we want justice," but, surprisingly, this was not coupled with a strong desire for revenge or retribution, as you might expect. There was a whole new black political movement emerging out of the Soweto riots, the so-called "black consciousness movement," which was an internal opposition that continued to crystallize. Most of the leaders of the ANC and PAC were in exile or in prison. They were becoming increasingly irrelevant as a new, younger leadership emerged within Sough Africa. Steve Biko was perhaps the best known name among them but there was a very large group of younger generation people in all the townships around the country who were emerging into informal political leadership positions.

So, getting back to your original question, there was indeed a danger of a very bloody revolution in South Africa, but at the same time we saw that the combination of the young Afrikaners looking for solutions and the moderate blacks who were not seeking vengeance might still provide an opportunity for a peaceful way out. Even then we could see that as a possibility, so contrary to the general outside impression, it did not seem to us at the embassy that it was a hopeless case, bound for major bloodshed.

Q: Often when you come to a situation where things are changing, it's the junior officers at the embassy who sort of get out and around more than the more senior officers, who are sort of trapped in their positions of the establishment. And so they often depend on the junior officers to really get out and take soundings and all that. Did you find that situation in South Africa?

EICHER: We did, yes. I wouldn't say that the more senior officers were not connected; the Ambassador and DCM certainly did have access and knew top people on all sides of the color bar. Where they did not really know people, where it was hardest to know people, was in the emerging black leadership, that is, the young radicals in the townships. There, I think it certainly was the more junior officers who were getting out much more and knew people better. The more junior officers tended to be more radical, if you will, more anti-apartheid, or at least more apt to be actively or outspokenly anti-apartheid, than the more senior officers did. It was to a large extent up to the younger officers to get out into the townships and meet people and find out what was going on. That was my role in Pretoria. In Cape Town, I was much more following Parliament and the Afrikaner establishment. I was in a particularly interesting position because I got to see both sides. The other less senior political officers and I did, in fact, continually try to push upon the higher-ups in the embassy the importance of giving greater credence to the new black leaders, and to push American policy toward a more equitable stance, and to press the South Africans to more reasonable policies. It wasn't that the embassy top leadership supported apartheid in any way; they didn't, of course. But, by virtue of their age, or their experience, or their professional standing, or greater commitment to reflect the carefully balanced U.S. policy, or whatever, they were just more restrained and more careful. In some ways, that translated to us a position that wasn't sufficiently anti-apartheid. I should say here that the Ambassador and DCM always seemed sympathetic to our positions, even if they often didn't go along with us. Some others in the embassy came across much more as supporters of the South African regime. And, the nature of the country was generally that the people in the embassy who were not specifically assigned to follow black affairs would be unlikely to meet educated blacks at all.

I remember at one point we had some internal dissent concerning a visit to South Africa by Henry Kissinger, who was secretary of state then. The country team was setting up Kissinger's schedule, including a meeting with a number of prominent black leaders which was, of course, something he had to do, even though as far as we could tell he himself was not much interested in doing that. He was coming to see the government leaders and this was really just a token meeting with blacks. Three of us in the political sectiothere were only four officers the political section, the counselor and three younger officerwere aghast when we saw this list of black leaders, which was a list of very nice people but didn't include people from the emerging leadership, nobody who we considered among the real, more credible leaders of black South Africa.

Q: Using the American term, more Uncle Toms and that?

EICHER: Yes, that's what we would have said at the time and probably did say at the time. In retrospect they weren't necessarily Uncle Toms at all, of course, but they were people who had reached senior positions in society without offending the government sufficiently to be banned or otherwise persecuted. I remember the three of us writing a joint memo to the ambassador telling him we were unhappy with the choice of participants in the meeting. He took it seriously enough to meet with us and ask for names of people that Kissinger ought to meet with. It was kind of tough for us. We came up with some names, but many of the ones that we had come up with were either in jail or they were so young and unknown that I guess it didn't make a sufficient impression on the ambassador. One, however, that we really pressed, because of its symbolism, was Robert Sobukwe, who was the head of the Pan-Africanist Congress. He was not in jail but was banned, meaning that he was restricted to a very small area and only could meet with one or two people at a time and could not go far from his home. I remember the ambassador saying, "You know, Sobukwe has been banned for many years. He's really kind of out of it. Besides that, he's in Kimberley and, you know, we couldn't work it out logistically." So they went ahead with their Uncle Tom meeting with Kissinger. We didn't win that one and we thought that was the end of the story.

But, when the embassy made its annual move down to Cape Town a few months later, the ambassador actually stopped in Kimberley himself and met with Robert Sobukwe. I remember meeting the ambassador afterwardI was the only one of the three who signed the memo who was part of the embassy's Cape Town contingenand him saying, "Oh, I was so impressed with Robert Sobukwe. You'd be amazed at how plugged in he is to what's going on." We felt a little moral victory there, proud, but it was a little too late.

I can't remember specifically what it was that Kissinger came for or what prompted his visit, but it was certainly part of the general effort to try to improve American-South African relations by getting the South Africans to lighten up their apartheid policies a little bit, at the margins at least, and make them a little bit more internationally acceptable so that we could cooperate with them. The visit was also probably connected to the effort to find a solution to the Rhodesia problem. It was my first ever SecState visit, so that was interesting for me. Of course, we had control officers for different events and teams that had to be at the hotel all night long just in case something came up. I remember one of the middle-of-the-night jobs I had was scanning all the newspapers and the wire services and pulling out stories that might be worthy of being read by the secretary and his team. On top of each news report we selected, we had to attach an index card summarizing the article in one sentence for them. One amusing story I got on my watch was the incident when Vice President Rockefeller got angry with some demonstrators and gave them the finger, which was caught on film by some photographer. I carefully pulled the story out and put a card on the top saying "the vice president put his finger into a sticky ethical controversy." That's about all I remember of the Kissinger visit. I was not in any of the meetings and only saw the secretary walk by at a large gathering. I don't remember him taking time to meet or greet the people at the Embassy; that would not have been Kissinger's style.

Q: Could you sort of compare and contrast the situation from your viewpoint in Pretoria and in Cape Town?

EICHER: You mean the political situation?

Q: Yes and sort of the ambience.

EICHER: In general, Pretoria is very much a government town. It's small and quiet. The sidewalks kind of roll up at five o'clock and everybody goes home. The big metropolis which was the commercial and financial center, Johannesburg, was about an hour down the road. Pretoria did have its own black townships, which were also very much in turmoil and it was in the Pretoria townships that I got to know most of my black contacts. In fact, since Johannesburg was a much bigger city with much bigger townships, the more important leaders emerged in the Johannesburg townships such as Soweto rather than in Pretoria, but those were generally covered by the consulate in Johannesburg rather than by us in Pretoria. We also had a consulate in Durban that followed events in Natal Province, which included most of South Africa's Indian population and most of the Zulus, as well as a good proportion of the English-speaking whites. There was also a full-time consulate in Cape Town. Cape Town is a wonderful, beautiful city, or at least it was at the time. It's right on the ocean, surrounded by pretty little mountains, which makes for a spectacular setting. Unlike Pretoria and Johannesburg and the other cities up north which weren't settled until the 19th century, Cape Town has a lot of history, buildings going back hundreds of years, a lot more character, including what they call the Cape Dutch influence in the architecture, little flower alleys, cobblestone streets, the Parliament Buildings and beaches and vineyards nearby. It was a much more cosmopolitan kind of city. Cape Town had a big "colored," or mixed race, population who were the majority in Cape Town at the time. The "coloreds" were also restricted and segregated, but not as heavily as the blacks, so you had a feeling that, in a sense, Cape Town was a bit more open and liberal than Pretoria was. It certainly was a much more pleasant city. We always said that as bad as it was to move back and forth between Cape Town and Pretoria every six months, the advantage was that we got to spend six months of every year in Cape Town, which most embassy people did not. It really was a much nicer place to be than Pretoria.

Politics were not quite as rough there either, although they did have their problems in Cape Town as well, and they did have riots in their townships. Generally, events in those townships were followed by the consular staff in Cape Town. In Cape Town, my own portfolio shifted radically and my main issue to follothe reason I was therwas parliament, which met just about every day. So, I would spend a lot of time going down to parliament. I got to know a lot of parliamentarians and a lot of the media folks who followed parliament. Since I was only about 26 or so, I tended to meet a lot of the young backbenchers more than the powerful leaders, but there were a lot of interesting people there. I knew Frederick de Klerk, who much later became prime minister and won the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela for bringing about a peaceful transition. I took him to lunch one day, just the two of us. He was still a backbencher but was already known as a young "verligte" who seemed to be going places. Frankly, I was less impressed with him than with some of the other backbenchers. I got to be pretty good friends with a couple of others who ended up as cabinet ministers in later years but were backbenchers at the time. These were the kind of people who gave me the sense that they wanted to try to find a solution other than apartheid, which they could see was not working. Or, at least, some of them did. The parliament was so heavily dominated by the Afrikaners, the Nationalist Party, that the opposition was practically meaningless. There may have been 20 or 30 opposition members out of a couple of hundred members of parliament. The real hope was for a change within the Nationalist Party.

Q: Looking at this group, described sometimes as "the great white tribe of Africa," the Afrikaner, was there a good solid generational gap growing among them? I would assume the hard-liners were the older group and the young people had other ideas, because, I mean, it's not much fun being so isolated and widely condemned.

EICHER: That's true. You could see this split starting to emerge among the Afrikaners. It wasn't quite so clearly the younger folks against the older folks, but certainly the older folks tended to be in the "verkrampte" or hard-line camp, and the younger folks tended to have a more enlightened viewpoint. This still was not a liberal view, by any means; it's not as though they wanted to bring down the Afrikaner power structure or even bring an immediate end to apartheid. But it was still significant to see quite a number of younger Afrikaners questioning the system, not in the sense of protest or vigorous opposition, but in the sense that they could tell is wasn't working, it wasn't going to be a long term solution. They were starting to search for an answer that would allow the country to move ahead peacefully and end apartheid without damaging their own interests and lifestyle and future. They were still afraid of taking steps to open things up in a way that might get out of control and lead to revolution. When I got there, John Vorster was prime minister. He was one of the architects of apartheid. He was very strongly conservative. He retired, while I was still there, he was replaced by P. W. Botha, who was also belligerently pro-apartheid. You just saw an increasing bunker mentality among the older folks, which was disturbing to some of the younger ones.

When I mention the bunker mentality, I'm not only talking about the bad image South Africa had in the world and the increasing number of sanctions against it, but there were also at the time the liberation struggles going on all over southern Africa. Although the ANC and PAC were not very successful in bringing the liberation struggle into South Africa proper, there was some active fighting against white regimes going on in South West AfricNamibia, which South Africa controlleas well as in Rhodesia, which had declared its independence and which South Africa was helping. Mozambique and Angola were still Portuguese territories until about a year before I got to South Africa, so there had been fighting, liberation struggles, in both of those. There was still fighting going on in both Angola and Mozambique while I was there, not against the Portuguese, who had left, but among the different liberation movements in Angola, and between the government and a rebel group backed by the white Rhodesians in Mozambique. There were still many South African troops in Namibia and they had made incursions deep into Angola. In fact, some South Africans once told me that they were with the military forces that went so far into Angola that they could see the lights of Luanda, which is all the way up at the north of Angola. They had gotten that far into Angola. They never admitted that publicly. So there was, in fact, a real war going on in the region, which contributed to the bunker mentality. The South Africans considered themselves a bastion against these communist-backed liberation movements and couldn't understand why the West didn't take their side, since they claimed to be fighting Soviet surrogates.

The Cubans were already in Angola at that point and the South Africans were vehemently anti-Cuban. I had one funny incident with that. I remember being taken to lunch in the Parliament's official dining room at one point by one of my South African parliamentarian friends, a young and very conservative fellow named Albert Nothnagel. We had a lovely lunch there and afterwards the waiter came around with a box of cigars and I said "They're probably Cuban cigars, ha, ha." He looked very offended and he called the waiter over and took a look and sure enough, these were Cuban cigars that they were serving in the South African Parliament, while their soldiers were up fighting the Cubans near the Namibian border. Nothnagel looked quite embarrassed. I suspect that he did something to stop that.

Q: Did the coloreds have any representation? Was there any kind of contact? How did they fit in?

EICHER: The coloreds, or mixed-race people, had no clout but, in fact, they were one of the chinks in the ideological armor of apartheid. I can't remember what the proportions of the population were; I think there were substantially fewer coloreds than whites. But it was a situation where the coloreds were not suitably accommodated by the apartheid structure. They did have their own political assembly of some kind but because they didn't have a specific geographical area to go with it, it just didn't quite fit in into the grand theory of apartheid, that all people would be equal in their own territories. Most of the coloreds were in the Cape Town area, but they were not limited to that. It was accepted that they would have to be part of "white" South Africa over the long term, even though apartheid's restrictions clearly made them second class citizens. Coloreds had their own facilitieseparate living areas, train cars, and so fortseparate from the blacks and whites. The same went for South Africa's Indian population, as well, which was concentrated in the Durban area. The Afrikaners hoped the coloreds and Indians would identify more with the whites than the blacks and therefore accept apartheid even if they didn't like it. In fact, it didn't really work that way; most politically active coloreds identified with the blacks.

Q: Looking at this, how about the, I don't know, is it called the "English group?" I'm sure they were as articulate as all hell, but did they have any particular influence?

EICHER: Not a lot. You know, they tended politically to be in opposition to the Afrikaner establishment, to condemn apartheid, and to want a more just system. They wanted to share power, but it wasn't clear exactly how they planned to do this or what final result they were looking for. They didn't have a master plan and it wasn't necessarily clear that they all wanted to completely get rid of the system of white control. In addition to the liberals, there was a white English partgosh, I have forgotten the name of iwhich in years past had run the South African government. But it was reduced to a small opposition by the time I got there. During the election while I was there, they were thoroughly trounced by the Nationalist Party and even lost to the more liberal, generally English, party which then took over as the official opposition. Again, by that time there was, as I say, maybe 30 opposition members of Parliament. They could have their say and often made very good points in debate, but they had no power to block anything the government wanted to do. Overall, the opposition actually lost seats to the Nationalist Party during the election while I was there.

Q: How did you find life in Cape Town? There might be people who would feel this is an abhorrent regime but life is pretty good I mean, if you happened to be white, English-speaking.

EICHER: Well, that's right. You could say that throughout South Africa, in general, living conditions for the foreign diplomats were extremely pleasant. Things are very cheap, everything was available, and housing was excellent; almost everybody at the embassy had a swimming pool at their house. Those of us who moved every six months had two houses, of course. We had one in Pretoria and one in Cape Town, which remained empty half the year when we were in the other place. There were good restaurants, good food, excellent wine, very, very cheap. We had wine we liked from the Western Cape for a couple of dollars a bottle. It was so cheap partly because the South Africans had trouble finding export markets because of their apartheid policy. There were all of the good colonial thingsporting clubs, servants. There were nice beaches and game parks. It was a lovely place to live if you were white and if you could close your eyes to the political situation, which, in fact, a disturbing number of Americans did, including at the embassy.

Those of us who followed politics tended to find it depressing after a while. It was a one issue country. You couldn't have a discussion at a lunch or a cocktail party or any conversation that didn't come back to apartheid. That was the only issue. In one sense, it made it very easy to be a political officer there because everybody was dying to tell you their side of the story and give you their arguments. You didn't have to dig. We were very well received by everybody, black and white and Afrikaner and English. I never had any trouble making contacts. I remember at first being a little nervous because I was a very young, inexperienced American officer being expected to follow parliament, which was this august institution of senior South African leaders. But, you know, I would call up and ask some parliamentarian I had never met to lunch and they would say well, yes, of course. No problem. We would invite people to our house and it would be the first time the whites had ever met or talked with an educated black, or perhaps any black other than servants. It tended to be an eye-opener for them. So, you would feel like you were doing a little bit of good, opening a dialogue and making the whites see things a bit differently.

Q: You could then entertain? I would assume it was our policy wasn't it, to make sure that we got our views across to all sides?

EICHER: Absolutely. You tried to entertain everybody. You had to do much of it at home, of course, because the blacks were not allowed into the restaurants downtown. In fact, they were just starting to make the first exceptions to that when we were there, as well. There were a few designated hotels and restaurants around the country open to all races, very few; I think there was only one in all of Pretoria. It was the best hotel in town. Since it was so expensive, there was no danger that many blacks would actually go there. But, in line with the development of apartheid, if you're going to have the black president of one of the homelands or other African countries come to Pretoria, he had to have some place reasonable he could stay. So, in theory you could entertain blacks at one or two hotels but it was very rare. Basically, you had to do that kind of entertaining at home, which we did a lot of.

We had some black friends in Pretoria who we invited down to join us in Cape Town. They were young folks like us and came down and stayed with us for a few days and it was difficult because you couldn't go to the restaurants together; we weren't supposed to go to the same beach with them; we couldn't go to the movies with them. Everything was so completely segregated. They were forward-leaning folks and there were some fairly deserted beaches around Cape Town, and so I do remember we spent a little time on a rather deserted beach, but it was a very uncomfortable way to have to be looking over your shoulder expecting trouble. Sometimes it would really strike you. While our friends were visiting us in Cape Town, he was out front washing his car in our driveway and our neighbor came over to ask if "our boy" could also wash her car when he was finished. It was hard for us; I can't imagine how hard it must have been for them.

I remember once seeing a merry-go-round set up someplace that, as with many things in South Africa, had a sign on it saying "whites only" and I remember a little black child just watching the merry-go-round going around. There were lots of things like that. It got to be heart-rending, and worse. You know, we got to know more and more people who ended up in jail, or exiled, or even dead. So, although living conditions were very nice for us, it got to be quite a depressing place and that was the reason, along with the move back and forth every six months, which caused us to leave at the end of two years instead of extending.

Q: Did you find interest on both sides of the apartheid divide in America's wrestling with racial discrimination? I mean, we were certainly working on the issue and in the '70s and, I mean, this was still very much a work in progress.

EICHER: We found that white South Africans referred to America's racial situation quite a bit, but didn't see it as a model of what they could do but rather along the lines of "you've got your problems, so how can you criticize us?" In fact, they would make a point of saying that our situation was not same as theirs at all. They would say that American blacks weren't really blacks at all, but "mulattoes," or "coloreds" and, of course, coloreds are much more civilized and much easier to deal with than real African blacks. So, in their eyes, Americans could not claim to have experience that was really relevant to what they were going through.

I remember getting once a telephone call from some irate persoas we do in every embasscomplaining about U.S. policy and asking how we could be critical of South Africa when we in the U.S. would never let a black be in a position of authority. The caller said that in the U.S. military, we would never let a black be a pilot, for example. I told him we already had black generals. He laughed and said "that's nonsense" and hung up. So that's just one small example of their not understanding the U.S. experience or seeing it as something relevant to them.

On the other hand, the U.S. policy toward South Africa became a huge domestic issue in South Africa. While I was there, the American administration changed from Gerry Ford to Jimmy Carter. Jimmy Carter took a much more principled position on South Africa, a harder line, and incensed the Afrikaners. There was a South African election shortly after Jimmy Carter became president and the Nationalist Party basically ran their campaign as if they were running against Jimmy Cartedenouncing him and his policy constantlrather than running against the irrelevant white opposition. Using this anti-Carter approach, they won by a landslide and ended up in an even stronger position in parliament.

Q: Did you, both in the Ford and Carter administrations, get Congressional visitors, particularly, well, I mean, from both sides of the spectrum but basically, black leaders coming down there to make a point or not?

EICHER: We did get quite a lot of congressional visitors. I was involved with some of them and not others. I remember we had Charlie Diggs, of Michigan, who was a prominent congressmaI think he was head of the Black Caucuwho was later convicted of something corrupt and I think sent to jail. I remember being not at all impressed with him. But, he was trying to burnish his credentials as a kind of a liberation leader, or a sympathetic soul, or whatever. I was his control officer. I had him over to my house to meet a bunch of my black contacts. It was easier for them to come to the house than to the embassy. After the meeting he left them all with a handshake and told them "good work, keep at it and if you need anything, there is a black officer at the American Embassy you should contact." And when he said this he was sitting in my house with my contacts, my friends, so I took great offense at Charlie Diggs.

There was another congressman whose name I don't rembeSykes, maybe? who I was control officer for. I remember the big problem I had with him was that he wanted to go on a lion hunt while he was in South Africa. Of course, hunting lions is something that's not easy to do these days, or even back then, even in South Africa. In the game parks you're not allowed to hunt. But, the South Africans would bend over backwards to try to be helpful to a friendly U.S. congressman, which he was. So, one of our military attachï¿½s pulled a few strings and the South Africans actually set up a lion hunt for this guy. It took a lot of effort on our side, and probably on theirs, to get it done. Of course, you can never just go back and tell a congressman that his request is unreasonable. Anyway, he got there and decided that well, he'd better not go on this lion hunt after all, because it might look bad to the folks back home if news got out that he was in South Africa hunting lions on the taxpayers' dollars. After we set the whole thing up we had to cancel it again! That's the only memory I have of that particular congressman.

Q. At least the lions came out ahead.

EICHER: The lions came out ahead. The biggest visit while I was there was Vice President Mondale and this was kind of a seminal point in U.S.-South African relations. He was coming out to South Africa to make another effort to try to nudge them enough in the right direction that they would start to become acceptable internationally. He was very carefully briefed. The big issue for those preparing the visit was how to draw the balance in U.S. policy between a desire for majority rule and wanting to achieve this through peaceful evolution. The idea of the trip was for Mondale to pressure and encourage the government to do the right thing, move in the right direction. There was not a desire to break entirely with the white South African government or even to worsen relations with them, although the subtext of the visit was that if they didn't improve, relations would inevitably get worse. So, there was a lot of emphasis during the trip preparations on what sound bites to use and not to use. For example, the white South Africans were particularly averse to the idea of "one man, one vote," since they saw it as a formula for an immediate black takeover and their relegation to insignificance. So, U.S. policy, under both Ford and Carter was to avoid publicly using the formula "one man, one vote," which would just get a nasty reaction and prevent further dialogue. So, instead, the U.S. position was couched in kind of diplomatic terms that, you know, all South Africans had to find a just solution for sharing power. They have to work on it together. It had to be a solution that's acceptable to all South Africans. We used these kinds of formulations as a matter of policy, to shy away from the "one-man, one-vote" issue to the extent we could, because using that term would just convince the South Africans that we were in favor of black revolution and having the whites swept away; that's what "one man, one vote" meant to them. "One man, one vote in a unitary state," I think, was the line they used to use to describe an endgame that would be totally impossible for them to negotiate.

So anyway, Mondale came out, he had a series of meetings, and everything went pretty well. In his farewell press conference a journalist, in fact, one of my good friends from the parliamentary journalist corps, asked him, "Mr. Mondale. Are you saying that we should have one-man, one-vote?" and Mondale said, "Yes." So, because of that one answer, the headlines about the visit were all negative in the white South African press; the South Africans were up in arms and the visit was kind of a diplomatic disaster. Nobody could believe that after Mondale was briefed so carefully, he had gone out there and supported "one man, one vote," which effectively cut off further discussion, as far as the South Africans were concerned. On the other hand, we young political officers were just elated and so was most of the black community. Relations with the South African government from that point onward for with the rest of my tour took an absolute nosedive and our relations with the non-white communities of South Africa improved by the same token. So that was a very interesting kind of turning point in U.S. policy.

There was one other small point that happened about the same time, or a bit later. The U.S. had always described the apartheid system as "abhorrent." The South Africans didn't like this, of course, and begged us to come up with another term. So, someone in Washington came up with the term "repugnant," which we started using, even though the South Africans thought that was even worse. They didn't ask us again to come up with new terms.

Q: Did Jesse Jackson get there?

EICHER: He did not during my time there, certainly not that I remember.

Q: Did we have a black officer at the embassy?

EICHER: We did have a black officer at the embassy. In fact, we had two in South Africa; one at the embassy and one at the consulate in Johannesburg; they were the second and third black officers to serve in South Africa.

Q: Who were they?

EICHER: One was Richard Baltimore, who was one of my young colleagues in the political section in Pretoria; in fact, he was part-time consular officer and part-time political. The other was Joseph Segars, who was the consular officer at the consulate in Johannesburg. There had been one black officer previously, who left just before I got there. He was an economic officer in Pretoria. His name, I don't remember. He had been the first. So, the South Africans were starting to get used to this, to some extent, at least. There were also a couple of other black diplomats in town, an Ambassador from Malawi, I think, and a couple of "diplomats" from the Transkei, which was the first of the "independent" homelands.

Q : What were the perceptions of the two officers in your talking to them?

EICHER: I spent a lot of time with them, especially with Rich Baltimore.

Q: Where is he?

EICHER: I've lost track of him. I heard that he was retired. He spent years in the Middle East and I'm not quite sure where he physically is these days.

I spent a lot of time especially with him since we were in the political section together. He was a gregarious sort of guy and was very forward in his approach to the racial problems in South Africa. He loved going out to lunch with me to different places every time, just to be there and insist that he was entitled to stay, just to make sure places had been integrated a bit, even if they were still off limits to South African non-whites. By that time, there have been enough publicity in South Africa about black diplomats that there wasn't much trouble; nobody... well, I think once or twice we had a little trouble, but not any serious trouble. We were asked to leave at least once but we stayed and insisted. We were never actually thrown out of a place. He always liked to get the most prominent table possible. He liked to do things that would just outrage the Afrikaners, to drive around town in his sports car convertible, and to date white girls. Joe Segars, in Johannesburg, was a lot more low key. I didn't get to know him as well at the time since he was in a different city. He had his family with hia wife and small soand that must've been extremely tough for him.

Q: Did you find in your work that there were sort of tribal politics that were going on between the Zulus and others? I mean, did this play any particular role or not?

EICHER: Well, it did, to some extent. Tribal politics were important especially within the context of the Bantustan system, which was going very strong while we were there. The first of the Bantustans, the Transkei, the Xhosa homeland, got its independence while I was there, or right before. The others were slated to. It was indeed, a big political issue at the time. A few black leaders had bought on to the idea. Some of them might sincerely have felt that they would be better off running their own homeland than as part of the oppressive South African system. So, you did have some "presidents" of homelands, and some blacks who were elected to homeland councils. Aside from Transkei, the most prominent was Kwazulu, the Zulu homeland in Natal, which was headed by the most prominent tribal leader, Gatsha Buthelezi. In general, the tribally-based leaders were seen by the urban blacks as "Uncle Toms." There was a debate within the Embassy about whether Buthelezi was an Uncle Tom or a liberation movement leader. He led a Zulu-based organization called Inkatha, which he styled a liberation movement. He was outspokenly anti-apartheid and was certainly a strong leader among the Zulus, so he was something of a problem for the South Africans. But, at the same time, he was acting within the system, as a leader of one of the so-called Bantustans. I remember arguing with the consul general from Durban, who thought Buthelezi was a liberation movement leader, while we in the political section saw him as more in the Uncle Tom category because that's how he was regarded by the urban blacks, who thought that he had sold out by accepting tribal politics and a position as a homeland tribal leader.

Also, I remember there were policy discussions about whether or not Americans would to be allowed to visit or even drive through the independent Bantustans. It was decided that official Americans would not be allowed to visit. This met with some unhappiness from a lot of people in the embassy community because they felt we should be more supportive of South African policy and why shouldn't we be going to these places? But, in the larger scheme of things, I think we in the political section saw the Bantustans as largely irrelevant. Tribal politics were going on, but they were really a side issue. We didn't spend a lot of time reporting on them. The real black political movements at the time were developing in the townships with the new black leadership, and the urban blacks rejected the whole notion of sub-ethnicity or tribal identity within the black community.

Now, interestingly, at the same time, many young blacks were abandoning their English names and taking up African names, which may or may not have been part of their "official," birth certificate names. For example, our good friend Victor Masipa, one of the national employees at the embassy, became Mokhedi Masipa. We became friends with lots of his friends, who had also changed their names from Cyril or John or whatever, to Africa names. This was all part of the growing black consciousness movement. You could tell it was new, and it was even funny sometimes, because they would introduce themselves with African names and then out of habit call each other by their English names. But, if you asked any of them what ethnic group or tribe they came from, they would become uncomfortable; they really didn't like the idea of tribal politics. Perhaps that will turn out being a saving grace for South Africa compared to so many other African countries where tribalism is still such a problem. In South Africa, apartheid gave tribal politics such a bad name that perhaps it will be less likely to cause the kinds of divisions in the country that you see so many other places.

Q: I assume that naval visits were out at the question?

EICHER: Naval visits were out of the question, I believe, yes. We did have a naval attachï¿½ and an Army attachï¿½ and an Air Force attachï¿½. There was actually even a little attachï¿½ airplane that they used to go flying around the country. They had quite good relations with the South African military. There was a big South African navy base near the Cape of Good Hope, Simonsig, that the South Africans always tried to hold out as a carrot for better relations, you know, "we've got this great strategic site right on the tip of Africa and wouldn't it be a good place for you to be using to track Russian submarines and control the passage between the two oceans," or whatever. So it was attractive to the American military, especially in the Cold War context, but we did not use it.

Q: Did you find the military attachï¿½s sort of fell into the... I mean, they were dealing with a white-run military. Did they feel comfortable with that? How did they see it?

EICHER: Some of my best friends at the embassy were a couple of assistant attachï¿½s because they were the ones I had taken Afrikaans language with. We got very close to them and close to their families. And, of course, they disapproved of apartheid. But the military generally, I think, tended to be on the more conservative side, as it always tends to be everywhere. I thought they were a bit too friendly towards the government, a bit too understanding of the problems faced by the white South Africans, and they probably thought I was unreasonable in my harder line views about South Africans. But it was all in a friendly way. I remember that there were a number of people at the embassy who I was seriously irritated with because they seemed so supportive of the South African government and its policies, but this didn't include the military attachï¿½s I was close to.

Curiously, a couple of the military attachï¿½s who were there with me were PNG'd (asked to leave the country as persona non grata) after I left. This wasn't aimed at them personally. It happened at a low point in U.S.-South African relations. I can't remember what might have brought it on or what the U.S. might have said or done to provoke the South Africans, but the South Africans took the occasion to look at the attachï¿½ plane more carefully and find that to their supposed surprise and horror that there was actually a camera on the plane and that these guys were taking pictures as they flew around. Can you imagine such a thing? What a discovery this must have been. So, they threw a couple of them out of the country, including one of my good friends. This always struck us as, you know, to some extent biting their nose to spite their face. Generally, the military attachï¿½s were among the people who were most sympathetic or understanding of the government within the embassy. It was also a bit ironic since for any of us young political officers, it would have been a badge of honor to be PNG'ed from South Africa. Instead, they did it to a military attachï¿½, the last person we would have expected.

Q: I may have this wrong but the Sullivan concept or the Sullivan Principles? Were they, was that, something that was going on? If it was, could you explain what they are and how you saw them at the time?

EICHER: It was indeed going on. The Sullivan Principles were a set of standards, ideas, practices, that U.S. companies which were in South Africa could voluntarily agree to adhere to. They included fair labor practices and non-discrimination. I can't remember exactly what the specific provisions were but they covered things like collective bargaining, suitable housing for workers, maybe even radical concepts like equal pay for equal work, and those kinds of things. There was a big issue at the time as to whether U.S. companies ought to be investing in South Africa or withdrawing from South Africa. The Sullivan Principles, although a private initiative, were endorsed quite strongly by the U.S. government. I can't remember whether that would have been Ford or Carter or whether there was a change between the administrations. The Principles were seen as a way in which Americans could continue to invest in South Africa and have their companies there but still set an example for the South Africans and be a positive influence and show that things could change positively as a result of foreign investment. The principles were inspired by the Reverend Leon Sullivan and had no official status but they played a very big part in the debate about investment or disinvestment and what Americans should or should not be doing. So, the idea was basically to have as many companies as possible sign up to the Sullivan Principles and commit themselves to good practices. In the bluntest terms, companies committed to the Principles were seen as "good guys" who would have positive influence on South Africa and those which didn't sign up to the Sullivan Principles were part of the problem, complicit in the apartheid system. Separately, of course, a lot of people in the States thought there should be no investment in South African at all, but at that stage it seemed very unlikely that the big companies would disinvest, so the Sullivan Principles were at least a positive step in encouraging the companies that were there to adopt better practices. I think it actually worked to a certain extent. On the other hand, the opponents would say that it just gave cover to the American companies which were working there; they could say they were helping to improve things, so it reduced the pressure to pull out completely, which the more vociferous opponents of South Africa advocated.

Q: What was happening? Your bailiwick was not the business community, but what were you getting from the American business community and the business community in general; what were you getting and how are they seeing things? What was the situation?

EICHER: This was still in the relatively early years of the anti-apartheid movement and the private Americans in South Africa tended to be very much pro-government, very sympathetic to the government. It was the rare American businessman or American tourist who would express serious concern about what was going on with the political or racial situation. There was a very high level of understanding for or sympathy with the government from among the foreign business community and even among many at the embassy. This was a continuing irritation to us "young Turks" in the political section, the complacency with which even many official Americans saw the whole situation in South Africa. They would tell us that "yes, of course, it's a problem but you've got to understand their situation" and "yes, of course, but what do you expect them to do?" and "you can't really expect them to turn over the government to these folks," and "look at the history of it." You know, we'd get exactly the same sorts of arguments from these Americans as we did from the South Africans, which to us showed that these unofficial Americans and a lot of official Americans seemed to swallow the South African arguments hook, line and sinker.

Q: Were you ever troubled taking a look at West Africa? It was not a very promising picture there. There were coups, tremendous corruption. And you think back to find an African run nation that you could pull up as a model.

EICHER: It was hard to do that. In fact, I think the only two functioning democracies in Africa at the time were Botswana and Gambia. You know, it seemed to me and to the other young officers in the political section to be just such a clear issue of right and wronblack and white, if you wiland oppression and so forth that we were frustrated there was so much policy disagreement over it. It was just wrong, and so why couldn't people see it was wrong and do something about it? Maybe we young and we weren't prudent enough. I was just 26 when we got to South Africa. Maybe it was good that I had the ambassador and DCM to calm down my "purple prose," as they used to call it when they edited the language in my drafts. I remember several times being told not to use such "purple prose" in my reporting. But, you know, from our point of view it didn't matter what was happening elsewhere in Africa. South Africa was richer and more developed; it should be able to find a better way to deal with its problems. South Africa should find a way to do what it ought to do. That was really all there was to it. We were following events in South Africa, not the rest of Africa, that was what we cared about and what was going on there was just so wrong. And, with this conviction, we thought that then U.S. policy was also wrong, or at least not strong enough. This was during a time when, in the rest of the world, the U.S. was still supporting dictators here and there. We had just lost in Vietnam as a result of ill-conceived policy and it was clear to us that in South Africa we risked again being on the wrong side of history. We were starting to move in the right direction. We had said "one man, one vote." We were advocating things like the Sullivan Principles. But we weren't pushing things as far and as fast as I and some of the others, a few of the others, there thought we should.

Q: Let's go back to this one-man, one-vote business. Where was U.S. policy coming from? How much thought was given to what the white South Africans wanted?

EICHER: I was still too junior to know what policy machinations might be coming out of Washington. I spent enough time with Afrikaners that I realized that a clear U.S. policy of "one man, one vote" would alienate them to such an extent that U.S. influence with the government would be seriously diminished. In fact, one of the emerging public debates on the whole South African question at the time was whether we should wash our hands of the situation and go homactually close down or restrict relationor whether we could do more good by staying and trying to have a positive influence on the ground. There was even a name for the first option; it was sometimes called the "Pontius Pilate option," washing your hands and going home, rather than being associated with a regime that was so bad and that was so unwilling to make reasonable changes to its policies. It never got to the point that official Americans seriously thought we should just completely pack it in, although that was certainly advocated in some academic circles and by most countries at the United Nations. But we did, at least some of us did, believe U.S. policy should get increasingly tough and we should ratchet down U.S. relations quite substantially if they did not improve their policies. I remember being elated when Mondale said "one man, one vote;" symbolically it finally put us clearly on the right side of the biggest political issue.

Q: Did you have any contact with the Israelis? What was our attitude toward the Israelis at the time?

EICHER: I don't recall having any contact with the Israelis in South Africa but there was one major incident involving them. I think I mentioned already that the Israelis were involved in arms cooperation with the South Africans and, in fact, there was quite a large and influential Jewish community in South Africa. While I was there, there was an atomic blast off the Atlantic coast of South Africa, which caught everybody by surprise, as far as I can tell. I think the embassy was really, seriously caught by surprise. I remember being in a meeting with the ambassador where he certainly gave every impression of not having known this was going to happen and wondering what was going on. One of the questions raised was whether it was a South African nuclear blast that they organized all on their own or to what extent cooperation with the Israelis might have been involved and if it might have been a joint project.

Q: Well, one suspects that they're doing their job. They're out trying to find out whether the South Africans were working on nuclear developments.

EICHER: The South Africans, of course, denied everything, even that there was a blast. But, I guess there were satellite pictures and maybe windborne radiation or whatever, but it was a big issue and it was pretty clear to us that there had been a nuclear blast that was off the coast of South Africa. No question that South Africans were involved and the remaining question was to what extent Israel was involved. There seemed to be a sense that there was certainly some Israeli involvement, a surmise, I should say, because I never personally saw any evidence of whether it was a joint effort or to what extent they may have just helped South Africa with the technology. That just was not clear at all.

Q: You mentioned there were a couple of other things you wanted to talk about.

EICHER: One of the most interesting meetings which I just wanted to mention was with Steve Biko, himself, when I was there. He was banned at the time, meaning he was restricted to his hometown in the Eastern Cape. But, a couple of us from the embassy, myself and another political officer, Steve McDonald, went down and spent a day with Biko in East London, where he lived. I wish I could remember more of the specific conversation. I know we wrote it up in great detail and once I tried to get it under the Freedom of Information Act and failed, but I suspect I could probably get it now. I remember him being an extremely articulate, impressive young leader. While we were in East London, we played sort of hide and seek with a team of South African security police who were assigned to follow him everyplace he went. Part of his banning order allowed him to meet with only one outsider at a time but he was happy to stretch that and meet with two of us and the security team didn't interfere. He took us from place to place by back roads, trying to lose this team of security agents behind him, who always eventually found us again. He introduced us to a lot of other very impressive people in that neighborhood who later on became leaders of the anti-apartheid movement. Biko was later arrested and killed in prison. I did attend his funeral, as did the ambassador and Richard Baltimore, the other young political officer, and Steve McDonald, since Steve and I were the two who actually knew him.

There was even an amusing little article in the South African press. The ambassador was there in his limousine with the American flag flying and for some reason they were having trouble with the flag and couldn't get it to stay up on its little fender flagpole. So, the newspapers reported that the ambassador was there with his flag flying at half mast for Steve Biko.

Biko's death was one of the things that helped sort of catalyze international opinion a little bit more on how badly things were going in South Africa. He became very well known internationally after his death. I remember a couple of my Nationalist Party parliamentary friends being very upset by this and saying, "You know, who is this guy Biko? Nobody ever even heard of him and now you're making such a big international furor over him." I pointed out to them that here I was a foreigner in South Africa and I knew him and had heard so much about him that I traveled a thousand miles to East London just to spend a day with him. So how come they had never heard of him? That just showed how out of touch with their own country they were. I don't know whether my arguments had any influence or not, but it seemed to give them pause.

Q: What was the relevance of Biko and how did he come to your attention?

EICHER: He was one of the main brains behind the so-called Black Consciousness Movement, the whole intellectuaand later physicauprising of the young generation of black South Africans that we've been talking about. It was sort of the South African equivalent, perhaps, of the "black is beautiful" movement in the United States but with a very strong political cast to it. He and a few of the others were the intellectual spirit behind the emergence of this.

The other big issue I was going to mention was Namibia. This was something I spent a lot of time on because it became my other portfolio, along with black politics and parliament. In fact, Namibia was a place which was generally off limits to official Americans because of its disputed status. It was still controlled by South Africa, as it had been since World War I, under a mandate from the League of Nations. The United Nations inherited the League of Nations mandate, but the South Africans didn't accept that. So, technically, there was an illegal regime occupying Namibistill called South West Africa by the South Africanand as a result there were strict limits on which official Americans could go to Namibia. In practice, there were only two of us, the political counselor and myself, who were allowed to visit Namibia. This was one of several travel restrictions binding on embassy people at the time; I've already mentioned that we couldn't travel to Rhodesia or to the "independent" homelands.

Q: Who was the political counselor?

EICHER: The first year I was there it was Bob Munn and the second year it was Jay Taylor.

I ended up taking a lot of trips to Namibia, which were basically political reporting trips, getting information from politicians and others there and reporting back on what was going on. There were quite a lot of interesting political developments going on in regard to Namibia. In the UN there was an effort underway, particularly during the Carter administration, to try to find a solution that would lead to the Namibian independence. Don McHenry was one of our UN ambassadors and he was leading the Namibia negotiations. In New York they had formed "the Contact Group," made up of the five western members of the Security Council, and this group was negotiating with the South Africans. So it was a big international issue outside of Namibia and I was in the lucky position of being one of just two official Americans who could actually go into Namibia regularly and report on what was going on there. It was exciting because, you know, despite being a 26 year old youngster, I got to meet all the big political figures in Namibia.

Q: Can you describe Namibia and what was going on when you were there?

EICHER: Namibia was actually still called South West Africa, officially. The name Namibia was still emerging and was starting to be used by the blacks but certainly not by the white South Africans. The South Africans did accept that Namibia was a trust territory, not part of South Africa, even though they didn't accept that the UN had any jurisdiction there. By the time I arrived in South Africa in 1976, they had finally accepted in principle that it should become independent. They had started a process called the Turnhalle Conference under which Namibia would become independent. The Turnhalle was the name of a conference hall in Windhoek where the meetings to discuss independence were held. In good South African style, the independence plan was based on ethnic groups. So, at the Turnhalle there were representatives of the whites and the Hereros and the Ovambos and so forth, all according to their ethnic affiliation. They were trying to come to some agreement on how Namibia would become independent, a little bit along the lines of what was happening with the homelands in South Africa, but not nearly as severe. The South Africans had even succeed in luring back to Namibia a few liberation movement leaders who were involved in the conference and lent it a bit of a veneer of respectability. The major liberation movement, SWAPO (the South West Africa People's Organization), would have nothing to do with the conference, of course. The Turnhalle process was going forward completely separately from the UN negotiating process, which was trying to bring real, internationally recognized independence to Namibia. The South Africans used the Turnhalle to some extent as a pressure point against the UN and the outside world. When the negotiations got too difficult at the UN they would say "well, we don't need to agree to that; we've got our own independence process going on and we'll just proceed with it."

The UN had adopted Security Council Resolution 385, which more or less condemned the South African-backed process and insisted on elections under UN supervision and control. The Contact Group, led by McHenry and others, was moving forward to try to make some actual progress in bridging the differences between South Africa and the UN, so that resolution 385 could actually be implemented. To do this, they needed to negotiate with the South Africans, which they actually started doing. McHenry came out a couple of times; I thought he was quite impressive. It was also nice to have the South Africans negotiating with a black American, which I think made them a bit uncomfortable. The internal procesthe Turnhalle proceswas not really relevant to the bigger picture except that it provided a real impetus for negotiations to find a solution before there was a unilateral declaration of independence, as there had been in Rhodesia, which would make it even harder to get an internationally recognized solution. And, of course, all the internal leaders took themselves seriously as needing to be consulted by the South Africans on the UN negotiations. In fact, the Turnhalle process was ongoing, so it was always out there as a threat to the UN negotiations and as a fall-back position for South Africa if the UN process should fail.

On my trips to Namibia, I would meet with all of the different internal parties, including SWAPO, the main black party. That's an interesting footnote: SWAPO had an internal branch in Namibia that was actually legal and operating openly as a political party, although it was boycotting the Turnhalle conference. It was headed by a young guy named Daniel Tjongarero, who I got to know pretty well. He later became a minister in the post-independence government, I think. The main white party was headed by a guy named Dirk Mudge. And, as I said, there were some former Namibian exiles, former SWAPO people and others, that had been lured back to take part in the Turnhalle, so the South Africans got some good propaganda value out of that.

The whole situation was really interesting and sometimes exciting. As the UN negotiations progressed, the five embassies in South Africa formed their own branch of the "Contact Group" and became involved in the day to day negotiations. There was some real progress in the talkor what seemed like progress. Shortly after I moved on to my next assignment, the UN adopted the next big resolution on Namibia, 435, which eventually formed the basis for Namibian independence, after many more years of negotiation. So, I felt a certain pride in having been involved in that, even in a small way. We thought we were closer to independence than we really were. I remember even that I wrote to my assignments officer in Washington and asked to be assigned to Windhoek next if the negotiations succeeded and we opened an embassy there.

As for Windhoek itself, it was just a very quiet, a very pleasant place. The atmosphere was not nearly as oppressive as it was in South Africa. You could feel the difference when you got there. Even though there was lots of racial segregation, it was not the same kind of apartheid that you had in South Africa proper.

Q: Was there much going on there or in other parts of the country?

EICHER: Well, at that time I never got out of Windhoek. In a later phase of my career, I went back and helped set up the first U.S. mission in Namibia; that was in 1984. Back in 1976-1978, I was flying in and out of Windhoek directly from Cape Town or Johannesburg. I stayed at the only big, nice hotel in town, the Kalahari Sands. I'd stay a few days, make the rounds of political meetings with journalists, political leaders, and others who might be influential, and then return to Cape Town or Pretoria, wherever I was flying out of. As I said, Windhoek was kind of a small town. It was very isolated, very pretty, very dry, and they spoke a lot of Afrikaans. In fact, I found I used my Afrikaans on the street more in Namibia than I did in South Africa. There was still a lot of German influence and a lot of ethnic Germans, left over from when it had been a German colony before World War I. There was even a German consul, the only foreign representative in Namibia, which they maintained because there were still a lot of German citizens. I remember that one of my best contacts was the editor of the German newspaper published in Windhoek.

Q: Who were the people? Was this all black or was this a mixture or what?

EICHER: I don't remember the proportions but it was similar to South Africa, although without the same level of "coloreds" and Indians. Among the whites, as I said, there was still a leftover German community, and there were more Afrikaners than English.

Although the South Africans had broken the negotiating structure of the Turnhalle into ethnic groups, you didn't feel the racial divide quite the way you did in South Africa. There didn't seem to be any kind of real Herero or Ovambo political movement, like the Zulu movement in South Africa, which really had any political influence on its own. It was just clearly a game the South Africans were playing. There was a chance that it would work, as long as the South African umbrella stayed over it. I mean "work" in the sense that they might have been able to take Namibia to a so-called independence that nobody would recognize, but that might continue to function for a long time, sort of along the Rhodesian model. That was the real threat to the UN process.

Q: Was there any reflection of the war in Angola when you left?

EICHER: There was. I mean, not so much in Windhoek as on the border. In Namibia, the South Africans had the military situation well in hand. There was, as I mentioned, this very curious situation where you had SWAPO, which was the main liberation movement, actually having offices, legally, inside the country. SWAPO, of course, rejected the whole South African Turnhalle process and they had people in the field based in Angola who were actually fighting a liberation war. That is, they were trying to fight a liberation war; it was an extremely unsuccessful liberation war. There were some places up in the far north where a certain number of insurgents would come across the border from Angola at a certain season of the year but they never got very far militarily, although they had a lot of popular support and sympathy. The South African military had it well in hand, and would follow them back well into Angola if necessary. In Angola it was kind of a mess as well, of course. They had recently become independent and had a civil war going on. Savimbi and his people were operating in the south of Angola with South African support at the same time that SWAPO was trying to use the same areas to come into Namibia.

Q: Did you find living in South Africa, being an American diplomat, did you find a heavy hand of security around you?

EICHER: I did not, directly. But I think I've mentioned that many of my black friends were questioned by security about their contacts with the embassy. It was also my first experience in having my telephone tapped, which I believe it was. And, of course the whole South African security situation was so repressive that it was constantly depressing for us. So, I didn't feel a heavy hand in the sense that I thought anyone was following me around or that I was in any danger, but certainly there was a heavy hand of security around me in the general sense that there was one all over the country.

Q: You left in 1978.

EICHER: I left in the middle of 1978 and I went on to my next assignment, which was Nigeria.

Q: So you were in Nigeria from when to when?

EICHER: From the middle of 1978 to the middle of 1980.

Q: How did you feel about going to Nigeria at the time?

EICHER: I felt alright about it at the time. I had been interested in African affairs. That's what took me to South Africa and I was looking for another African assignment. I can't remember exactly what our first choice was but Nigeria was not one of the countries on our list. We wanted to go to Kenya or to GhanAccra might have been our first choicand when those didn't work we finally got word that we were going to Nigeria, which, little did we know, was not quite the same thing. We thought that West Africa was West Africa, but Nigeria turned out to bfrom a living point of viequite an unpleasant place to be.

Q: Did you at the time feel that you were, did you feel like an Africanist?

EICHER: Well, kind of, I mean, to the extent you can be an Africanist after one tour. But out of my two tours in the Foreign Service, one was in Africa. I had also done a lot of work on Africa at university, since I was interested in it. I was looking forward to another African tour and I guess I was slowly becoming an Africanist and would go on to a couple of African tours after that as well. So Africa did interest me. I was still in the mode of wanting to go to unusual places that I hadn't been to before and the politics of Africa were certainly very interesting. It struck me that Africa was kind of a neglected element of U.S. foreign policy, so it was something that as a junior officer you could get your teeth into, and do more interesting things and go more interesting places than you might if you were assigned to one of the big European embassies.

Q: In 1978 what was the situation in Nigeria?

EICHER: It turned out to be an interesting two years politically. I was assigned as a political officer again, which, you'll recall was my "cone." In Nigeria at the time was there was a military government led by General Obasanjo. Interestingly, that's the same Obasanjo who was president of Nigeria again until a couple of weeks ago. When I was in Nigeria, Obasanjo had launched a process to take Nigeria back to civilian rule after many years of military government. This was kind of revolutionary in Africa at the time; military governments just didn't hand power back to civilians. So Obasanjo was an unusual leader in that regards and was doing something very good in terms of moving toward a new constitution and elections. The new constitution was based on the American model. He divided the country into 19 states and set up a constitution which was similar to ours. About halfway through my tour in Nigeria they had the elections and successfully returned to civilian rule. Shehu Shagari was elected president of Nigeria and Obasanjo, to his credit, went back to the barracks. This was a big event. There have been a lot of coups in Africa and a lot of post-colonial undemocratic regimes. But what you had in Nigeria at the time was the biggest, most important country in black Africa going back to civilian rule, and on the American model, to boot. So it made a very interesting time to be a young political officer in Nigeria.

Q: Let's talk about the embassy, the ambassador, the DCM.

EICHER: The ambassador when I got there for the first year was Don Easum. He was replaced later on by Steve Low. The DCM was Parker somebody, I can't remember his last name. Katherine Clark-Bourne was political counselor. There were about four or five of us in the political section. It was a good-sized political section, bigger than our political section in South Africa. When I got there, we were in the old embassy, in downtown Lagos in an old building. It was not very pleasant accommodations but there was a new embassy being built. Everybody was looking forward to moving to the new building. We were so cramped that I had to share an office with the other junior political officer, Bob Frasure, who later went on to die in tragic circumstances in Bosnia during the war there. After a few months, we moved to the new embassy building out on Victoria Island just off the coast, which was much newer, nicer digs.

Nigeria was a very tough place to operate. We didn't have working telephones anyplace in Lagos, including in the Embassy. We didn't even have a telephone instrument in our home. Even where there were telephones, you could virtually never get a call through. Traffic was absolutely horrendous and moved at a crawl. So it became very difficult to get around and do your job as a political officer, especially in comparison to my previous post in South Africa. If you wanted to meet with anybody or even talk with someone, you had to get in an embassy car and laboriously make your way to their office, maybe an hour to get downtown, or twice that long to get to the university, and hope they were there when you arrived and hope they had time to see you. Then, you would crawl back to the embassy in traffic afterwards. So it was very difficult and often frustrating. You wasted an awful lot of time. Often you got somewhere and the person or people you wanted to see were not there; "he's not on seat," they would say; we got to hate that expression. When the ambassador wanted an appointment with someone, he couldn't telephone, so he would send one of us down in person to arrange the appointment for him. You couldn't even get a phone call through to the Foreign Ministry. Going there and returning might be a whole morning's work, just making one appointment for the ambassador. And I had to go down to the Foreign Ministry a lot. I remember it was in a high-rise building downtown and the elevator never worked. The ministry itself was on the sixth, seventh and eighth floors so we would always be walking up that many floors to get to the Ministry. Those of us who went to the ministry used to joke that there should be a reciprocity agreementhat Nigerian diplomats in Washington should be required to climb eight flights of stairs for their appointments at the State Department.

Q: I would think this was sort of an "amateur hour." You know, the damn place doesn't work and the people, the Nigerians... Oh, it's just not working. I mean, it's not working how Americans like things to work.

EICHER: I have to admit there was a lot of that feeling around, both from the expatriate community generally and from the people at the embassy. It did give you kind of a negative view of the country because it was so difficult to do anything. It was such a hard place to live. Nothing seemed to work, nothing was available in the stores, there were terrible health problems, it was dirty and run-down, and the population in the Lagos area tended to be extremely arrogant and unfriendly and hard to deal with, as well. So there was kind of a mixed feeling. On the one hand, it was an unpleasant place to be, but on the other, you knew you were in Africa's most important country, with the biggest population, biggest economy, most military power, and all that; all in all a very vibrant society. You know, it was, in its way, very exciting. It always seemed like there were things going on politically. They were moving toward general elections and every day there were new political parties being formed and speeches and rallies and one thing and another, so professionally, being able to follow all this and to have so much going on seemed very interesting. But physically, it was extremely difficult. Crime was also very bad. Each of the embassy residences had its own guards. Housing was very bad. The power went off all the time. The weather was hot and sticky. It was just a very unpleasant place to be.

Q: To what did you ascribe, you and you colleagues ascribe the fact that things didn't work?

EICHER: I'm not sure that we thought very much why things were not working. To me it was my first experience in West Africa. It seemed that this must just be the way that it is. You know, partly the colonial powers left it a wreck, partly there was internal corruption which was making it a wreck, partly they just didn't have the skills and education that they needed; partly they weren't managing it as well as they could. I don't know. There was an expression "wa-wa," "West Africa wins again." Every time something went wrong you just sort of took it in stride. You'd roll your eyes knowingly and come to expect that, of course, if something can go wrong, it's going to go wrong.

Q: By this time you had three children.

EICHER: Yes.

Q: As always, the impact if it's a lousy place to live, it's the wife who has to put things together.

EICHER: That is true, indeed. She certainly was not very happy living in Nigeria. On the one hand, because it was such a tough place and because the embassy people all lived more or less in the same general neighborhood of town, we made a lot of quite good friends and there was a lot of esprit de corps. There were a lot of young families, a lot of kids the same age as ours, a quite reasonable American school, with a lot of young teachers who we got to be friends with. The ambassador opened the residence grounds with its swimming pool to the embassy community almost all the time on a permanent basis. There was a commissary where you could get things, fortunately, because very little was available on the local market. There were food orders. You'd have to order frozen food every three months and they gave you two extra freezers to keep it in. Since power went out all the time, your many-months supply of food was always in danger of thawing out and spoiling. When we first got there, there were no generators at the houses, you just lived with the power outages. Eventually, they installed generators that you could run for a few hours at a time when the power went out. The generators made so much noise, however, that the neighbors were always complaining.

So, my wife, to get back to your question, really didn't like it at all. The kids tended to be sick fairly oftenot to mention her and me, as welfrom one thing or another, you know, eating this or getting that infected, or whatever it might be. We were able to have household help as we had in South Africa, so we had somebody to look after the kids when she wasn't there. It gave her some freedom and she did work part-time at the embassy on and off, for the Foreign Building Office, which was building the new embassy and for the regional security officer, among others. So, she got by.

But, life was generally not pleasant. Housing was sub-standard in comparison to embassy housing elsewhere. The place we were in had rats running in the yard when we first got there, before we had it cleaned up. The roof was in such bad shape that twice we had upstairs rooms flooded after heavy rains. We had an electrical fire because the wiring was bad. Crime was very bad, so much so that at night we were supposed to lock ourselves into the upstairs of our house, which was all barred off at the top of the stairs like a jail. We had guards at the house, two young, unarmed Nigerians, one was the day guard and one the night guard. On a trip back to the States, we bought them each a pair of blue jeans, which became one of their prized possessions. One night, the night guard had his stolen. We asked how it happened and he explained that he took them off and hung them on the line before he lay down to go to sleep and they were gone when he woke up. This was the guy who was supposed to be up guarding us at night! When we got to Nigeria, there were still public executions of criminals; the Nigerians would execute prisoners by tying them to a pole on the public beach and shooting them. Some of the Embassy Marines would go down to watch. The practice was ended before we left.

Lagos did have pretty beaches, but we seldom went. The currents were so dangerous along the West African coast that you weren't supposed to swim; many people used to drown. In fact, once we were at the beach and there was a dead body washed up. All the kids wanted to go down and look at it and we had to restrain them. And, you would be constantly hassled at the beach, both by vendors trying to sell handicrafts and things, and just by onlookers, some of whom, shall I say, weren't polite. To get away to the beach, we would occasionally drive to Lome, in Togo, two countries away but only a four hour drive; we'd convoy with a couple other embassy families. Lome had a very nice resort hotels, and good French food, and was just a pleasant place to get away from Lagos.

We also had another moving disaster going to Nigeria: our shipment of household effects was stolen off the docks and never reached us. What a disaster that was! There we were with three little kids in a country where you couldn't get anything, with our household effects lost. There certainly was no thought in any of our minds that we were going to extend in Nigeria after two years.

Q: Let's talk about your work. You were there during the elections?

EICHER: Yes. The elections took place about halfway through the time I was there.

Q: That was fun?

EICHER: It was good fun. We did try to get out, we tried to meet politicians, and we tried to get around the country. In fact, there was an effort, to the credit of the embassy management, to try to get us out quite a bit to travel in Nigeria, which was quite difficult and took a lot of planning. We'd have to get a big embassy vehicle, usually one of these giant "carry-alls," as they used to call SUVs; they weren't called SUVs yet at that time. You'd have to load up the vehicle with C-rations because you couldn't be certain food would be available anyplace you went. The hotel accommodations, if they existed, could be unbelievably bad.

I ended up taking a few of these different excursions, which were extremely interesting and really did get you out into what I considered to be the wilds of Africa. I remember my first one, which was very soon after getting to Nigeria, which was a trip up to the north. I went up and joined the consul general in Kaduna, it was Joe Lake at the time, and had quite a trip out to eastern Nigeria, to Maiduguri, to meet some politicians and check out the situation there. That was very interesting. We decided we would drive up to see Lake Chad because this sounded to both of us like a very interesting thing to do. We ended up driving on some endless, very bad dirt roads through very wild country, just driving and driving and driving. It seemed to never end. We sort of compared ourselves mentally to Livingston trekking endlessly through the wilds of Africa. No matter how far we wenhourwe couldn't find the lake; again, it was like Livingston not being able to find the source of the Nile. We were asking people and they were saying "well, it's right here," sort of like, "open your eyes, stupid" but we couldn't see any water. We never actually saw a lake. Apparently, at that season the lake dried up in the area we were in. You could see all around you sort of a flat plain full of reeds that you wouldn't know was a lake unless somebody told you it was. So, in a sense, we were in the lake, in the lake bed, at least. We finally decided, we told each other, we could honestly say we had been "to the shores of Lake Chad," even if we couldn't say we had seen Lake Chad.

While I was away on that triwhich, as I said, was very soon after arriving in Lagothe upstairs of our house flooded during a storm. The roof was bad; that was the first of several floods we had. It was late at night and my wife was home alone with the kids; we had no telephone; and we barely knew anyone yet. She had to run down the street to a neighbor's in the middle of the night and ask them to radio the GSO (the general services office) to come help bail her out, literally. She still hasn't forgiven me for that one.

Another trip I took with a couple of people through the eastern delta region of Nigeria, which was very interestinPort Harcourt and Calabar and the whole southeast area of Nigeria, the area that had once seceded from Nigeria as Biafra. In addition to meeting with politicians and other local leaders, I remember going to meetings at the University of Calabar and then proudly buying a University of Calabar T-shirt in their bookstore, which I thought was fun to wear around because it was so exotic. We also visited the oil companies who were out there and I remember being helicoptered out to one of their oil platforms off the coast to get a look at that. It wasn't really part of my portfolio, but one of the guys I was traveling with was an economic officer so we did both political and economic meetings, since we were traveling together. That was my first ever helicopter ride, as well is my first time on an oil platform, so that was interesting.

Q: Was there any residue of the Biafran War when you were there?

EICHER: Not a lot. I mean, people talked about it still, of course, and everybody had been through it so it was very much part of recent history. Our housekeeper was an Ibo who had lost her husband and children and home during the war. I guess it had been less than ten years since the war took place, so it was still very much part of the background people were living with. On this trip to the east that I'm talking about, we drove through much of what used to be Biafra, but you really couldn't see real devastation there and didn't get the feeling that there had recently been a war there. There were maybe just a few ruined buildings or wrecks that were left over from the war. The Ibowho had been the secessionistwere still quite a force in Nigerian politics, which generally tended to break down along ethnic lines. There were a lot of different divisions in the country, the largest one being the North-South division, to some extent this mirrored a Muslim-Christian division, although that's a simplification and is not entirely accurate. And, in the southern Nigeria, you also had an east-west division between the Yorubas and the Ibos, who were the two largest groups, but there were lots and lots of other ethnic groups scattered around there as well. So it would be very simplistic to try to divide it into threYoruba, Ibo and northern Hausa-Fulanalthough that was the sort of the standard way people would describe the country's ethnic divisions in their briefings to visitors.

Q: Did you see the military having a hand in the elections as far as favorites or support or what have you?

EICHER: We didn't really. It seemed at the time to be a quite reasonably run contest. The military, after all, was anxious to return to civilian rule and didn't want trouble. Obasanjo was trying to get rid of power, not hold on to it. But, this is a very interesting question to me now because I have spent much of the last 10 years heading election observation missions. I try to think back sometimes about what I really knew about elections at that point in my life, and whether when I and others at the embassy who were following the elections we were looking for the right things. I'm not sure anymore that we were. I don't doubt that there must have been a lot of manipulations that went along with the elections. But that was not the impression we had at the time and it was certainly a lively campaign, and there didn't seem to be any serious restrictions on freedom of speech or freedom of assembly.

There were lots of candidates. There was even one rather amusing candidate, Nigeria's biggest pop star, a fellow named Fela, who had been involved in protest movements in the past. He decided he wanted to run for president. One of the requirements of running for president was that a candidate had to have a campaign establishment in all 19 of Nigeria's states. This was a rule because they wanted to avoid the kind of regional politics that had led to the Biafra war, so every party was required to be a nation-wide party; there could be no regional parties. So Fela's solution to this was to have a big ceremony and marry 19 wives in one day, one from each of the 19 states! Through their family connections, presto, he had a campaign establishment in each one of the 19 states. So that was kind of fun.

Q: How did he do?

EICHER: Not very well, as I recall. He was never really considered a serious contender, although he got a lot of publicity. He had his 19 wives support him, I guess, and maybe a bunch of fans. There was no limit on the number of wives a man could have in Nigeria, if he could support them. In fact, men weren't even necessarily expected to support all of their wives; it was not uncommon for each wife to be expected to support herself and her children.

But the real presidential contest, if I recall correctly, was between Shagari, who was the main northern candidate and had a young Ibo for his vice presidential running mate, Alex Ekwueme, against an old-time politician named Awolowo. Awolowo was a Yoruba and drew most of his support from the Yoruba areas of southwest Nigeria. He was well known as one of the leaders of Nigeria's independence era. As I recall, Shagari pretty much trounced him. They were the only two candidates who really figured in the contest. There were also lots of state races and Senate races and other election contests going on at the same time that I don't remember much about. But I do remember there was a lot going on that we continually had to follow and that we did a lot of reporting. In addition to election reporting, there was a lot of biographical reporting to do, since a whole new set of leaders was emerging in Nigeria. I remember that the Department even sent out an extra officer for several months, maybe even a year, just to do biographical reporting.

Q: Were we concerned about the Islamic influence in the north? Did we see in this a certain amount of, you might say, intolerance that might affect Nigeria?

EICHER: It wasn't really seen as an issue at the time at all. I don't recall it in any of our reporting or any reporting from the consulate in Kaduna. Certainly Islam was part of the political background to the country and we recognized that there was an Islamic north and a more or less Christian south, which affected people's political attitudes. But, Islamic radicalism was not something that had emerged at all as an issue.

There was a civil war going on in Chad at the time, which was a neighboring country, and I know Nigeria got involved regularly in the efforts to find a solution in Chad. They had a big conference in Lagos and, I remember the political counselor asked a couple of us to go down and find out what was happening at the Chad conference. There were no telephones, of course. We couldn't call or make an appointment with anyone. So, we went down to the hotel where they were holding the conference on Chad and started chatting up some delegates in the lobby to see if we could find out what was going on. Pretty soon a couple of security officers approached us and asked us what we were doing and whether we had credentials and of course, we didn't, and so we were evicted from the Chad conference.

Q: Did we feel the hand of Qadhafi messing around in Nigeria at all?

EICHER: Not that I can recall, although he was very active in the Chad conflict. You know, Libyan activity in Nigeria would've been something that we probably would have been concerned about at the time if it were happening, but I don't remember that being a problem. Nigeria was an OPEC country, I believe. There was certainly some oil politics in the bigger sense but that was not in my portfolio so it was not something that I followed or recall particularly.

Q: By the time you left how did you find it? Was there a pretty good political structure or not?

EICHER: It seemed to be a pretty good structure. As I said, it was modeled after ours and so it had to be close to perfect. (Chuckle.) You know, it looked like they might actually make a go of it, which would have been wonderfuAfrica's largest country moving successfully to democracy. As it happened, it didn't last very long. But, it was still a functioning civilian democracy and something we could be quite hopeful about at the time I left.

I remember that soon after the new government took over, the civilian government, we had a visit by a big congressional delegation, led by Jim Wright, the Speaker of the House, and somehow I ended up as his control officer and it actually went quite well. The new congressmen and senators in Nigeria were really pleased to meet some of their American counterparts. The Americans actually visited the newly-built Senate Hall and the House of Representatives or whatever they called it in Nigeria, and they were all talking to each other about how you vote and what buttons you press to vote electronically in each chamber. So, that was actually a very happy CODEL (congressional delegation) and I remember being very impressed with Jim Wright, as well.

We had a lot of other visitors I should mention, as well. It seemed at times as if the whole American black establishment felt like they needed to visit Nigeria. I can't remember all of them. I don't remember if Jesse Jackson came out or not; I think he may have. We had Tom Bradley from Los Angeles and Andy Young and many others. My wife was asked to take care of Andy Young's son, who was about the same age as our oldest son; I can't remember exactly how she got stuck with that. The same day that he was coming over, we had one of those typical Nigerian mess-ups where the sewer lines backed up into our kitchen and we had a kitchen flooded with sewage to contend with. So she had a stressful time of it, but it went well and everyone was grateful to her.

One particular visit which I ended up as control officer on, which was my all-time greatest control officership, was Muhammad Ali. He came to Lagos as an official U.S. envoy to try to persuade African countries not to participate in the Moscow Olympics. The U.S. was boycotting the Olympics because Russians had invaded Afghanistan. Ali, being a good Muslim, was against the Russian invasion of a Muslim country and someone had convinced him to sign on to this idea of being an American envoy to the African states to get them to join the boycott. Nigeria was one of four countries he was visiting. From a personal perspective, I found this to be just a wonderful little visit, a great experience. Muhammad Ali was one of the best-known Americans in the world, probably the best known American. He played it up wonderfully. We had a bus, a small minibus, which we took him and the delegation around in. He did a lot of his famous clowning. He would hang out of the open door of the little bus as we went alongenerally slowly through Lagos traffiand shake his fist at people on the street and absolutely everybody knew him instantly on sight and regarded him as a hero. Everywhere we went we would have women and children running after the bus waving and shouting "Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Ali!"

Interestingly though, in private he was very calm, very subdued, even meek. This was so different from his public persona that it came as quite a shock. He would carefully listen to the instructions that were given to him by Lannon Walker, a deputy assistant secretary of state who had come out with him on the delegation and would do as he was told carefully and very meekly. But, as soon as he got out into a crowd, he was clowning and sparring with everybody making a good impression in line with his image as "the greatest." And, he hit on all the women, what a womanizer! When there was a little gap in his schedule I asked if he would go greet the kids at the American school and he agreed. I think that was my wife's idea. Anyway, we got it organized. The school let all the kids out of class and everybody crowded around him and got to see Muhammad Ali and shake his hand. It was a great visit.

Q: Was Nigeria in the Olympics?

EICHER: Yes. From a substantive point of view, the visit was a flop, which was fairly predictable. Nigeria attended the Moscow Olympics. They loved Muhammad Ali but they didn't buy his message.

Q: Did you feel the hand of either the black caucus or political correctness or something? I mean, obviously, Nigeria was a black African country and a lot of things weren't going very well.

EICHER: In the end, being in Nigeria really made clear the extent to which Africa was a side issue of U.S. foreign policy. I mean, it's not as if we ever imagined that Africa was at the center of things, but here we were in the most important, largest, wealthiest, most powerful African country and I don't remember having a feeling that Washington considered it to be important in the grand scheme of things. In South Africa, I felt much more like we were in the center of issues that people cared about.

Q: You left there in 1978?

EICHER: 1980.

Q: Where did you go?

EICHER: I was assigned to African Area Studies so I went to UCLA for a year, which was the academic year of 1980 to 1981. I always joke that after two tours in Africa the State Department decided that it was time for me to learn something about Africa.

Q: How did you find UCLA for African studies and did it have a specialty or an attitude or something you didn't find in the Department?

EICHER: Let me start out by saying this was a wonderful program that the Department used to havI'm not sure if it still existof sending people to do a year of university area studies. The Department had somehow selected four schools in the United States that they thought had the kind of African studies programs they would like to send Foreign Service people to; just one or two people a year were selected for the program. I had been accepted to do area studies quite a while before the end of my tour in Lagos, but in the Department's usual fashion, they never really explained to me how the mechanics of the program worked. I was trying to get them to send me to London, where other Foreign Service people had done African studies before, I think at the University of London. It sounded like it would be good fun to do it there, but training in London had been discontinued. They told me my arguments were so persuasive that they were going to start it again for subsequent years but couldn't do it for me. They gave me a choice of the universities of Indiana, Michigan, Northwestern or UCLA, but didn't send me anything about any of the programs at the different schools, and they said they needed my decision immediately. I was still in Lagos and didn't have any information on which to make a decision on the different programs. There was no Internet back then, of course, and as I said, we didn't even have working telephones in Lagos. So, strictly on the basis of geography, I decided with my family that we would rather be in California than in the Midwest. In particular, my wife came from Southern California and she had complained good-naturedly throughout my career up to that point, "why don't we have an embassy in southern California so we can go back there?" I had never lived in California, so it sounded good to me. And it was a good choice. I'm not sure I would want to live there permanently and she was also disappointed at how much southern California had changed since her girlhood.

UCLA is a great school with a very good, big African studies program. The State Department's approach to the program was that they were not sending me to area studies with the goal of getting a degree. If fact, they kind of discouraged the idea of degrees. The goal was rather to get a very broad view of the continent and to understand Africa a little better. We were encouraged, I was encouraged, to take African art and African music, and other cultural subjects as well as the history, political science, and economics that I might have been more attracted to. So I took a little bit of each and I even audited a bunch of extra courses. I took it quite seriously and worked hard, but it was nothing like working a full-time job and I was able to do quite well. Actually, I did get a degree as a result of a quirk: a UCLA master's degree, a Masters in African Studies, required proficiency in an indigenous African language and the university accepted my FSI 3/3 rating in Afrikaans as the indigenous African language. So, already having the language, I didn't have to take quite a number of courses that most of the other students had to struggle through. As a result, I could complete all the requirements in one school year instead of two. The UCLA program was multidisciplinary, so I could take a broad variety of courseincluding African art and so forth as the State Department wanteand still meet the requirements for a degree.

All in all, I thought it was an enriching kind of experience. I had already spent four years in Africa so I could put a lot of it in context. Perhaps the program might have done me more good professionally if I had taken it before I went to Africa rather than after I had served two tours there. The program was perhaps a little too academic for a Foreign Service officer, maybe not as practical as I thought it could be. I have one story that shows what I mean. My main "Politics of East Africa" course was taught by a Marxist professor and the main question that formed the basis of the course, the theme of the course, was whether the bourgeoisie in Kenya was a "nationalist bourgeoisie" or a "comprador bourgeoisie." That is not exactly the kind of question we struggle with at the State Department. But it was a fun year and an interesting year. And it was a nice campus where you could sit under a jacaranda tree and enjoy your studies. It was also a good way to get re-acclimatized to the U.S. again after three tours abroad.

But, it turned out to be a bit hard on the family to move somewhere for just one year. We decided that would be the last time we'd do a one-year tour that involved a move.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the professors were plugged in to Africa? I mean, were these people who talked about Africa, who had spent time under the African sun or not?

EICHER: They seemed to be quite plugged in. They had all spent a lot of time in Africa, had done research in Africa and continued to do research in Africa. There were some African professors there, along with Americans, so they were a good group although, as I said, sometimes they specialized in issues which were really not really relevant on a day-to-day basis, shall we say, to the kinds of things that we were doing in the Foreign Service.

Q: After that, we're talking about 1981, are we?

EICHER: Yes, 1981.

Q: Where to?

EICHER: Back to the Department. Actually, to the Department for the first time, except for my short training stints. I was not anxious to go to Washington. Even after more than seven years in the Foreign Service, the Department still seemed big and mysterious to me. I didn't know much about how it worked. I had joined the Foreign Service to see the world, remember, not to become a Washington bureaucrat. I somehow pictured work on the Department's geographic desks as being very administrative; I didn't have a good understanding of how policy-oriented it is. Once I actually served in Washington, I liked it very much.

The African studies year was actually linked to a follow-on assignment in the Department. They linked the assignments to make sure you would have at least one assignment that would be relevant to your course work. So, I went on from UCLA to my first Washington assignment, which was as the senior desk officer for Liberia and Sierra Leone in the Office of West African Affairs in the State Department.

Q: What were the situations in Liberia and Sierra Leone when you took over the desk?

EICHER: Liberia turned out to be 99% of what I worked on. I had a deputy desk officer who covered Sierra Leone under my general supervision, but even he spent almost all his time on Liberia. There was far more to do on Liberia than Sierra Leone because Liberia was "our" African countrthat is, of all the countries in Africa, it was the only one that was generally regarded as primarily an American responsibility. In the years I was on the desk, Liberia was also something of a disaster, which required constant crisis management for us. There had been a coup in Liberia just a year before I took over the desk. The long-time rulers, the Americo-Liberians (who were descendants of freed American slaves who had gone back or been sent back to Africa from the U.S. in the 1800s), were ousted by a group of young, poorly educated, low-ranking soldiers from eastern Liberia. The most prominent was Samuel Doe, a sergeant, who became head of state after the coup, or the revolution, as they called it. During and after the coup, Doe and his cohorts had murdered, or executed, a bunch of very good friends of the United States who had previously been in power, lining them up on a beach in front of a firing squad. There was a real fear at first that he was anti-American and that he was toying with the Libyans and might fall under their influence. People were afraid that we might "lose Liberia," the African country that was most identified with the U.S. and where we had a lot of investment and facilities, as well as prestige, at stake. So, a policy decision taken even before I arrived at the desk to try to "save" Liberia. To do this, we had to recognize that our friends the Americo-Liberians were a political force of the past. We would have to try to keep the country afloat economically and to transform Samuel Doe into a responsible, respectable U.S.-leaning leader. I was trying to follow the very early stages of this process from California while I was at UCLA, and then I took it over when I arrived at the desk.

Q: Everyone was still shocked by, I mean, I'm being awfully facetious, the "beach party" and everything that had happened. This has lingered to this day.

EICHER: It really was in some ways a disaster and it was very sad. But maybe it was inevitable. Liberia had been ruled since the 1840s by the Americo-Liberians; the capital city, Monrovia, was named after President Monroe. They had established a basically stable, mildly prosperous society, considering the circumstances and what they had to work with. They were very close to the United States for all kinds of reasons of history and even family connections. But, in some ways they were perhaps not all that different from white settlers in other parts of Africa. The Americos controlled most of the political and economic power, while the indigenous groups, or "tribes," in many cases had little to show for a century and a half of independence. There was growing disaffection among the indigenous groups, and this group of young enlisted men saw an opportunity to take over the government and did so quite brutally. A lot of prominent leaders were tied to stakes on the beach and gunned down, so it was quite dramatic and traumatic for the United States as well as for Liberia.

These gentlemen who took over the countrDoe and his palpretty much came from one tribe, the Khrans of eastern Liberia, one of the poorest and most remote groups. The Khrans were a fairly small percentage of the populatiomaybe 15% if I remember righand so their takeover also sowed the seeds for further ethnic strife later on in Liberia. But they were able to hold it together for a while, more or less. The coup-makers were a fairly small group and some of the members of the group soon fell out with each other. In fact, one of my amusing African possessions is a T-shirt I bought in the marketplace in Monrovia when I visited, that has the pictures of the "heroes of the revolution." The shirt has printed across the front six photographs of the six enlisted men who led the coup and two of them were overprinted with big "Xs" because in the meantime they had fallen out with the others and been executed themselves, so they were no longer "heroes of the revolution." But the shirts were still for sale in the market. In good African fashion, they didn't want to waste good T-shirts just because the people in power had changed. So they just Xed out a couple of faces and went on selling them. I guess it was maybe the African version of the Soviet practice of painting past political leaders out of pictures, after they had fallen out with the regime.

So, this was the situation when I came and took over the desk in 1981. Sergeant Doe was really not capable at that point at all of trying to run a government effectively or to run an economy. I mean, he needed a lot of help and when the Americans went to him and offered help, he gladly accepted it. In fact, he turned out to be very well disposed towards the United States. He was not ideologically driven at all.

Q: Was there any help from the UN?

EICHER: No, the UN didn't really get involved. There was no international crisis surrounding the coup, no threat to international peace and security. That was before the days of big UN missions in Africa and elsewhere. Liberia was seen internationally as sort of an American responsibility, in the same way that France might be expected to help out one of its former colonies that was having problems.

We learned about Doe as time went along. He was pro-American partly because one of his teachers when he was a boy had been a Peace Corps volunteer who he had stayed in touch with and was quite close to. This American fellow, I can't remember his name, would go back to Liberia from time to time to visit with Doe. Once or twice we tried to use him to reinforce messages we were trying to instill about the economy, or whatever, but he was really more of just a personal friend to Doe. In fact, when Doe visited the United States a while later, one of the main things he wanted to do was go visit his Peace Corps friend.

The Liberians needed help on many fronts. A lot of the tiers of government had been wiped out. The economy had previously been pretty solid, with big foreign investments in rubber and iron ore, but investors were very frightened and there was even talk of pulling out. We wanted to reassure them by showing that a responsible government was going to be taking over. The government, and Doe in particular, seemed to turn to us for almost everything, for almost every decision from the biggest to the smallest things. At one point, Doe promoted himself from sergeant to five-star generathat shows you something about hiand he came to us to ask for the five-star insignias because they didn't have any in Liberia. Could we get those for him, please? We did. At the other end of the spectrum, his foreign minister came to me on the desk once and wanted to have a discussion with me about defining the goals of the Liberian revolution and in what direction it ought to go.

We worked hard to get them more assistance. I spent a lot of time working on that. One of the biggest challenges I had was working on an IMF (International Monetary Fund) program that would stabilize the economy, and then keeping the program on track by finding ways to help the Liberians meet their quarterly IMF targets, sometimes through sleight of hand. Every three months I'd arrange for the release of a tranche of Liberia's ESF (economic support funds, a U.S. assistance program) at a proper moment so they would have money in the bank on the day they had to meet their IMF targets. The IMF would then release more aid, which would keep them going for another three months. I also dealt a lot with some of the big American banks. When we couldn't release the ESF on time, we arranged with the banks to provide bridge loans to Liberia with our next ESF payment as collateral. We were very anxious to keep Liberia from defaulting on any of its international economic obligations, its loans. We worked with the so-called "Paris Club" and "London Club" of lenders to restructure the country's debt so it wouldn't default. There were a lot of cliff-hangers, where we worked hard to get things done before default deadlines. I learned a lot about the IMF and the World Bank and international economics.

There were all kinds of other U.S. interests in Liberia that took a lot of time and effort from the desk. The U.S. had a Coast Guard facility in Liberia, sort of an antennae farm, that was just one of three around the world that was, I think, the first global positioning system, used to guide ships using satellite navigation. There was a big Voice of America station there that transmitted to much of Africa. The main Firestone Tire and Rubber plantation was there. Another American company had a big iron mining concern up north. There was also the Liberia flag registry, you know, almost every merchant ship in the world flew the flag of either Liberia or Panama. The Liberian flag registry was actually based in Washington, run by a bank with offices across from the White House. We dealt with them from the desk regularly, you know, running interference for them with the Liberian government and being reassuring that people could continue to register their ships and that the Liberian government was not suddenly going to cause problems for international shippers. So, there were a lot of different things going on.

There were also a lot of high-level visits back and forth which we had to organize. Official Liberian visitors to the United States caused an endless series of problems and amusements. Doe himself wanted desperately to meet with President Reagan and our ambassador judged that he might react very badly if we couldn't produce a meeting. The White House wasn't enthusiastic about meeting Doe, and we had to make all the usual arguments about how important Liberia was to U.S. interests. The first time we tried, with great effort, we got him an invitation to meet with the vice president (George H.W. Bush). Doe rejected this in a funk. It started to become something which honestly threatened relations, you know, if the president couldn't find time to meet with him, why should Doe keep taking our advice on policy issues. We finally made the visit happen and it happened on very short notice. I think another foreign leader must've cancelled for some reason and Doe was given his slot, with only a couple of weeks notice. We had extremely little time to prepare for his visit, which was termed an "official working visit." By the time the visit was approved, we were already past the normal deadlines for getting briefing papers done and making arrangements with the Secret Service, and Protocol and so forth. We had to work around the clock to get everything done.

Q: Was there a problem or concern, press concern, or public concern and repugnance about Doe?

EICHER: There certainly was, at first, and that lingered on. But, as I said, there was a policy decision to try to rehabilitate this guy rather than the alternative of cutting him loose. So, the point is that we cared about Liberia, and while Doe wasn't the person we might have chosen, he was what we had to work with. We didn't feel like we could or should abandon the country. And, Doe was turning out to be pro-American and trying to keep things moving generally in direction we wanted, albeit amidst lots of corruption and self-enrichment and so forth. We had to struggle constantly against this, which we did with middling success.

When Doe finally did get to the White House, we had an interesting anecdote. After we worked all those late nights and weekends to put together all those perfect briefing papers, as is required when a head of state visits the White House, President Reagan apparently didn't read any of them. He introduced Doe to the press corps as "Chairman Moe." We were mortified! It's not as if it was a complicated name or anything. There was the president, who we had worked so hard to brief, making a huge gaffe right in front of the press. We were afraid it would be an irritation and detract from the visit. We figured that Reagan must somehow have associated him either with Chairman Mao or, more likely, with Curly, Larry and Moe, the Three Stooges. Anyway, despite the blunder, Reagan apparently very much impressed Doe and the visit was a big success.

Some other Liberian visits went even less smoothly. While I was on the desk, I got a call one night in the middle of the night from the New York police department. They said they had arrested a fellow who was in an altercation with a prostitute, and the guy was claiming to be a cabinet minister from Liberia. I had to admit that yes, there was a cabinet minister from Liberia by that name who was in the United States on a visit. That, unfortunately, was kind of typical of the quality of some of the Liberians who visited us on the desk. In this case the matter resolved itself when the woman declined to press charges against the minister, maybe because she would have gotten charged, too. Or maybe, as the DAS (Deputy Assistant Secretary) laughed when I told him the story in the morning, she didn't want to hang around the police station any more since in her business, time is money.

To be fair, there were also some good people in the government. I think of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf who is now President of Liberia, and there were others, too. But we did have to deal with a lot of clowns.

Q: How did Liberia fit into the African Bureau? Did people giggle or what?

EICHER: Yes, of course, for some of them Liberia seemed like a joke. If fact, in retrospect much of it seems like a joke to me. Even at the time, you couldn't help laughing about some of it. But we were working hard and were much invested in trying to make Liberia a success, so some of it was depressing rather than funny.

If I didn't have so many Liberian visitors to my office, I would have put a sign over the door that said "Colonial Office," because we seemed to be involved in everything. It was so different from what my colleagues in West African Affairs were involved in with their countries. But again, Liberia was "our" problem, America's problem. We did get a fair amount of attention from senior people. The White House visit was just one example; not many African leaders made it to the White House. The assistant secretary for Africa, Chester Crocker, was focused very heavily on Southern Africa, so we would only occasionally get his involvement in Liberia. But from all the deputy assistant secretaries and elsewhere in the government we could always get a little bit of attention for Liberia when we needed it. Generally people would roll their eyes as if to say "Oh, no. Not Liberia again. What do you want us to do this time?" If it was Liberia, it was almost certain to be bad news of some kind. But for all the eye-rolling, they would usually agree to do whatever it was that needed to be done to help keep Liberia on track. Although it was a struggle, we could usually get the resources we needed, unlike my Africa Bureau colleagues, who were always struggling for a few extra AID dollars and usually could not get them.

Q: Had the issue of blood diamonds come up at that time?

EICHER: No, that was before blood diamonds became an issue. The terrible civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone didn't come until long after I had left the desk. There was a little bit of diamond smuggling going on, but it wasn't being used to fund conflicts. Liberia was not a diamond producer but diamonds were produced next-door in Sierra Leone and I think also in another neighboring state, Guinea, and then were smuggled out through Liberia. So there were certain things going on with diamonds, but not to pay for civil wars the way it happened later.

Q: Was anybody messing around in Liberia with Qadhafi? The Soviet Union?

EICHER: Qadhafi was certainly trying get some influence there. Right after the coup he made a big overture to Liberia, which was apparently well enough received that it scared the U.S. into taking a friendlier attitude toward Doe rather than a hostile one. So it could have ended up quite differently if we had adopted a different attitude towards Doe. As for the Soviets, they were not a factor in Liberia; it was too much of an American sphere of influence. I'm not sure they even had an embassy there.

Q: But during your time was Libya pretty well out of the picture?

EICHER: Libya was pretty well out of the picture. Liberia was really very, very solidly in the American camp while I was there.

Q: How about the black caucus in Congress or the African-American movement in the United States? Was there an affinity there?

EICHER: There was. There were a lot of ties going way back between the African-American community in the U.S. and the Americo-Liberians; these were some of the things which had suffered from the coup. I think the Black Caucus generally, by the time I got there, which was a year after the coup, took an attitude much the same as the administration did. You know, we don't like what happened, but we need to work with this fellow as long as he continues to be pro-American; there is a long history of American ties and contacts in Liberia and we need to keep them alive and rebuild them. In fact, people used to roll their eyes whenever I wrote one of my memos saying "Liberia, our oldest and closest friend in Africa...." It was such a clichï¿½, but it was true and I had to keep reminding people who didn't deal with Africa that Liberia wasn't just another African basket case. It was our basket case.

Q: Was Charles Taylor at all a factor?

EICHER: No, not at all. Not yet.

Q: Was there anything going on in Liberia in terms of a movement against this group that took over?

EICHER: Not that I knew or that we could discern. Doubtless there was already some grumbling by people who still weren't getting their piece of the pie. And Doe had set a bad precedent, established the model, you know, by staging a coup. When one group of sergeants takes over, another little group of sergeants starts thinking "they did it, so why can't we?" On top of that, there was a growing feeling that Doe was favoring his own Khran people, so that set the stage for other groups to be dissatisfied. In short, while I was on the desk there didn't seem to be any immediate threat to Doe, but the government was far from efficient and it didn't take a deep analysis to figure out that the same thing could happen to Doe as he did to the Americos. In the end, a few years after I left the desk, he was ousted and very brutally tortured and murdered. The one thing that seemed over was that the power of the Americo-Liberians had been smashed and it wasn't going to come back. In that sense, Doe's coup was indeed a revolution; it changed the social order as well as the government.

Q: You were doing that from when to when?

EICHER: From the middle of 1981 to the middle of 1983.

Q: Today one thinks of Liberia that if you don't have an evacuation of the embassy, you are falling down in your job but there was nothing like that when you were there?

EICHER: Nothing in Liberia, no. But it was one of the quirks of working in West African Affairs that there always seemed to be a coup somewhere or an evacuation somewhere else. There were lots of precipitous turnovers of government in the region. So, there were continually, it seemed, task forces set up in the State Department Operations Center to deal with Ghana or whatever other country might be having a coup at the time. Everyone in the office would get dragooned to help work on these task forces, so I did my share of weekends and night shifts on the Ghana task force or whatever task force.

Q: Was Liberia also sort of a safe haven at all because of these, a place where you brought people to?

EICHER: Well, it was certainly our biggest overall establishment in West Africa so I wouldn't be surprised if we did, but I don't recall any specific instance of it.

We did also have a lot of American visitors to Liberia, which we encouraged. We had a very activist ambassador, Bill Swing, who would try to drum up visits from as many prominent people as possible, to help people understand Liberia and to build ties. He was very good at that. So there were, for example, a lot of congressmen going, from the Black Caucus and the African Affairs Subcommittee and others, who we would have to brief. Swing also managed to get people like the commandant of the Coast Guard to go out and visit since there was a Coast Guard facility there. He even got the U.S. postmaster general to visit; I remember that because I was in Liberia at the same time as he was; we were both staying at the ambassador's residence together. I think the idea was to get help for the Liberian postal system and to encourage them to get some extra revenue by printing stamps that collectors would want to buy. All the visits did broaden the number of U.S. friends of Liberia and the base of Americans who knew about and were interested in Liberia. It was a very skillful policy by the ambassador and I admired him for it and learned a lot from him about how to work the system.

Q: Was Liberia used as an entre point? Did people come to Liberia and then go off to see other parts of Africa? I'm talking about people who were important politically or economically or something.

EICHER: I don't recall. Perhaps being an African desk officer, you get kind of parochial. So maybe people were using it as a jumping off point, but I guess I wouldn't have cared much about where else they were going. On the other hand, if I ever heard someone was going elsewhere in Africa, I would get in touch with Swing right away and see if we could convince them to add Liberia to the trip. Swing and I got along very well and started to think alike on Liberia issues. If he needed something from Washington I could usually get it organized for him and if I needed a boost on something, I could always get him to send in a cable at a crucial moment to help sway policy discussions in the Department.

Q: What about trying to attract investment there?

EICHER: It was really more a case of trying to keep the existing investments there during a tenuous period; getting big new investments at the time I was on the desk was not really in the cards. The embassy was trying to get the government people to stop harassing the business people, to adopt policies that would keep the business people there. We spent a lot of time trying to pressure the government on those kinds of issues.

There were also some other big economic issues that we spent a tremendous amount of time on. Liberia still used American currency, which was actually one of the things which saved the economy. They couldn't print their own money and that kept the currency stable and to some extent kept the deficit from getting out of hand. But, contrary to our advice, they started minting their own dollar coins. They tended to be called "Doe dollars," they had a picture of Sammy Doe on them. They were supposed to be the equivalent of U.S. dollars and started out as such, but very quickly declined in value. Nevertheless, the big transactions were still done in U.S. dollars and that did help the foreign investors and protected the local people against runaway inflation.

Q: By the time you left in 1983 were things fairly solid?

EICHER: They were fairly solid. At least within the African context. You couldn't say that this was a wonderful, responsible government but it was a government that had done a lot of things that it might not otherwise have done to try to stabilize itself. It was slowly becoming respectable. Doe was wearing suits and ties rather than fatigues. He very much wanted to be seen as a respectable player on the world stage. Some universitin South Korea, I thineven gave him an honorary doctorate and he started calling himself "Dr. Doe" instead of General Doe. The investors were starting to settle down. The IMF program was working, more or less, most of the time. So you could be reasonably hopeful that Liberia was going to get back on track. You know, we didn't "lose Liberia" on my watch, which was actually something of an accomplishment. Things there tended to improve, quite a bit, actually, during my two years on the desk. Still, you couldn't say that it was solid yet.

Q: Did Liberia have representation at the annual United Nations get-together in the fall?

EICHER: Oh, sure. They were always there and they even sent their vice head of state one year. His name was Podier. His visit to New York was another wonderful Liberian travel story. Podier arrived in New York and the Liberian mission had done virtually nothing to prepare the logistics for his visit. They expected his very small security detachment, provided by State Department diplomatic security, to do all kinds of things for him which were way beyond their mandate. I got lots of complaints from DS (Diplomatic Security) about these "miserable Liberians." The best story, I think, was when Podier was to have his courtesy call on the secretary-general of the UN, who was Javier Perez Cuellar at the time. Podier and six companions showed up downstairs at their hotel and the only vehicle there was the security vehicle. The limousine that the Liberians were supposed to supply didn't show up. So, all of them piled into the DS car for the trip to the UN. As they are driving to the United Nations, they spotted an army surplus store on the side of the road and yelled "Stop, stop, stop!" Remember, these guys were basically young corporals and sergeants from the bush, who hadn't begun to grow into their roles as statesmen. So, they piled out of the DS car and into the army surplus store and started trying on fatigues and checking out the gear. A couple of them wandered into the peep show next-door. Podier finally selected his fatigues or whatever he wanted to buy, and then they had to assemble everyone else, and go find the guys at the peep show, and finally pile back into the DS car and resume their trip. They ended up being way late for their appointment with the UN secretary-general. We got these and other, similar stories from the DS agents who accompanied them. DS was so mad that they threatened to cut Liberia off, but of course they couldn't. Fortunately, aside from Doe and Podier, no other Liberians asked for security escorts.

Q: After this, which was, in a way, not quite sideshow because there were significant issues at stake, I mean, it was a country where we had assets then, where did you go?

EICHER: I had another tour in the Department. I went to the office of the United Nations Political Affairs, where I was the officer in charge of African affairs.

Q: You did that from when?

EICHER: It would have been from the summer of1983 to the summer of 1985.

Q: It is always, of course, an important thing to try to get African votes in the UN which has so many African members. I mean, people were talking about Chad and trying to drum up support for American positions on other issues. I mean you must have found yourself very busy with so many votes in your portfolio.

EICHER: Very busy. But, in fact, it wasn't so much about trying to line up African votes, although that sometimes entered into the job. The way the office worked, if there was an issue we needed votes on, the officer responsible for that issue would draft a cable to all diplomatic posts, or all members of the Security Council if it was a Security Council rather than General Assembly issue, setting out the U.S. position and giving talking points for the American embassies and USUN (the U.S. mission to the United Nations, in New York) to use. So, if the problem were, say, a Middle East issue, the officer in charge of Middle Eastern affairs would have to write the cable and talking points. They would clear it, of course, with me and others to make sure it was sensible and appropriate for the country or countries they were sending it to, and then the cable would go out to our embassies. If the cable were on an African issue, I would draft it and get it cleared. Sometimes we would have to craft specific points to make with specific African countries, but that was rare; there were just too many issues and things happened too quickly.

Occasionally I'd get a call from one of the USUN people in New York, most often, in fact, from Ambassador Richard Schifter, who would say, "Look, we need four more votes on this resolution or that resolution. Which African countries do you think we should hit and what kind of incentives can we offer?" or, "Can you see if there's a little AID money that we can offer to Guinea Bissau to win their vote" on whatever issue, that sort of thing. Schifter was a master of vote counting. He was not officially responsible for African Affairs at USUN, but he was the only one of the five U.S. Ambassadors to the UN who seemed to care much about Africa, even if it was primarily in the context of getting votes. The U.S. ambassador in New York who was in charge of Africa was Alan Keyes, the same Keyes who later ran unsuccessfully for president a couple of times. He had been a mid-level Foreign Service Officer and he was suddenly appointed as an Ambassador in New York as a result of Jeanne Kirkpatrick's intervention. Although Keyes was nominally in charge of Africa at USUN, I don't know how he actually spent his time; he never seemed to be involved in any of the African political issues; maybe he was spending his time self-promoting. He would never even return telephone calls, unlike the other ambassadors. Schifter seemed to be the only U.S. ambassador in New Yorout of fivwho had a strategic, pragmatic view of how to make issues work at the UN. The others were so-called "neo-cons" (neo-conservatives) who seemed more focused on ideology than on getting things done; they would usually rather lose a vote and stand proudly alone on principle than look for an approach that might put the U.S. on the winning side. So, although Schifter's calls always meant more work for me, I came to appreciate his outlook. I learned a lot from him, which proved very useful during my later assignment to the UN in Geneva, where vote-counting and strategic approaches to specific countries were often very important in getting resolutions adopted.

In fact, my job turned out to be mainly a Namibia job. I was chosen, selected for the position, by the Africa Bureau because the position was regarded as "their man" in the UN Bureau (the Bureau of International Organizations Affairs). At that time, by far the biggest African issue in the UN was Southern Africa and, in particular, Namibia. Namibia was starting to be a very hot issue, with the U.S. much involved in negotiations aiming at Namibian independence. It turned out to be just a fascinating job from that perspective. You may recall that I had covered Namibia during my tour in South Africa five or six years earlier, and I was still very interested in Namibia. I became part of Assistant Secretary Chester Crocker's "team," as he called it, which was a little group of half dozen people who were working on the Namibian negotiations. Because Namibia was technically a UN trust territory, and anything which came out of the negotiations would have to be approved by the UN, UN people were very much involved. There was a UN "Commissioner from Namibia," and the secretary-general himself was much concerned about Namibia. It was an issue for both the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as the UN Trusteeship Council. So, Namibia became the issue for my tour in IO/UNP (Bureau of International Organizations Affairs, Office of United Nations Political Affairs). I spent far and away more time on Namibia than anything else; well over half my time on just that country, out of a continent with 50 countries.

There were other things, of course, that I did have to spend time on. Other Southern African issues were always hoSouth Africa, of course, was still an apartheid state at the time, which was a very big issue at the UN. There were lots of UN votes on South African issues. At one point during my tour, the U.S. even voted in favor of a Security Council resolution increasing sanctions on South Africa; I was proud of my role in that, which was an achievement, especially since it was the Reagan administration. There were also other African issues that arose at the UN, things like Western Sahara and the problems in the Comoros. Sometimes, I'd even get sucked into non-African issues. When the Russians shot down a South Korean Airlines Boeing 747 full of passengers that strayed over the Soviet Union, I was dragooned to hand carry up to New York some huge charts and photos for our ambassadoJeanne Kirkpatricto use during a Security Council meeting. We had to get special permission to take the big portfolio on board the plane, since it was way over-sized.

And, of course, there was the annual meeting of the General Assembly, which involved lots of preparatory work, talking points and so forth. I'd also go to New York for the UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) each year, for the opening week or so, when all the heads of state and foreign ministers would be there. I'd be attached to Crocker, rather than to my own assistant secretary. He would meet with African leaders and I'd go along to some of them. A meeting with Robert Mugabe sticks in my mind; he came across as quite a hard-liner, sort of proud to be a Marxist and anti-Western, even way back then. Sometimes we'd have a private room in a hotel to meet people, but often it would be in the UN "delegates' lounge." That was a terrible place to have meetingit was incredibly crowded and noisy during the big UNGA week and everyone would be looking over your shoulder and it would be hard to hear. It would even be hard to find places to sit, it was so crowded. Me or my counterpart at USUN, Gerald Scott, would have to go save seats well before a meeting. Poor Gerald usually got stuck with that, since he was the control officer, but I remember helping out.

Q: On Namibia, when you took over, when you had the job, what was your impression of Chester Crocker and "constructive engagement" and all that? I'm talking about from your own way of looking at it.

EICHER: Well, there are at least a couple different things I guess I should say. I had already dealt with Chet Crocker a little bit when I was on the Liberia desk. Liberia was not at all the top of his agenda, but Liberia issues would get to him from time to time. And, of course, there were the Africa bureau staff meetings where I would see him and occasionally there would be a Liberian visitor that I would sit with him with. So, through this kind of day-to-day business I got to know him a little bit. I liked him very much and I liked his style. He was thoughtful, low-key and friendly and a gentleman. He seemed to appreciate advice and ideas. He was a good person to work for. I liked that.

As for "constructive engagement," I was not really a fan of that at all. But the policy was not really all that different from what the U.S. had been doing before, it was mainly a different name and a different spin, and perhaps a greater intensity of engagement. It's not as if the Carter administration had broken ties with South Africa; they were also engaged. Constructive engagement as a policy was more complex than it seemed on the surface; it did have reasonable policy foundation that was trying to move things in southern Africa in the right direction. Opponents of the policy generally equated "constructive engagement" with cozying up to South Africa, but it was really regional policyou had to engage with South Africa if wanted to make progress on Namibia and other regional issues, as well as on South African internal issues. So, it was something I thought I could work with. When I joined the Foreign Service, I had made the decision that I would try to influence events and make my contribution to change from inside the policy process rather than trying to promote change by protesting from outside. So, this job was a chance to try to do that. Crocker was the kind of guy who would listen to advice, and who could be influenced by sensible arguments, so I might be able to make a difference. And, of course, peace in Namibia was something I believed in very much and it was exciting to be involved in that process. So, despite my initial policy reservations, I was happy to give it a try, especially since Namibia had been one of my beats a few years earlier so I was already interested and had some good background experience. It was nice to be back a few years later seeing what was happening to Namibia. Negotiations were starting to move at that point. This was already two or three years into the administration.

Crocker's management approach more than lived up to my expectations. He had "team" meetings regularly to discuss everything that was going on in the negotiations. These almost had the atmosphere of university seminars, which might not be odd since Crocker was a professor. There were only about half a dozen of us, and he would listen carefully to all points of view. In fact, he seemed to have structured the team to include people with differing points of view, or at least that's how it turned out in practice. A couple of the team members would usually argue for a very tough line on every issue, a sort of "punch them in the nose" approach, and a couple of us would usually argue for a softer, more diplomatic approach. There were "memo wars," with each of us drafting short memos to Crocker setting out our different points of view on the issues that came up and arguing for different courses of action. Crocker liked the memos; he always read them carefully, almost like a professor reading school papers and making little written comments on them. So, we got the feeling that our views were really appreciated and taken into account. Sometimes our arguments would win the day and we'd be making policy on a key issue. It was exciting stuff.

Q: What was the issue on Namibia?

EICHER: Namibia had been a German colony, South West Africa, before World War I. It was taken over by the British and South Africans during World War I and then administered by the South Africans under a League of Nations mandate. By the 1970s and 1980s, the South Africans were still unwilling to let it go, and so the big issue was to get the South Africans to agree to Namibian independence. Back when I was serving in South Africa, the South Africans had started a whole process to take Namibia to independence in a way that was not at all approved by the international community. The UN passed a number of resolutions, particularly Security Council resolutions 385 and 435, which said that Namibia would have to become independent through elections under UN supervision and control. The issue was really how to convince the South Africans to let go of Namibia in a way that would be internationally acceptable.

Before I moved to UN affairs, the administration seized on a strategy that included a lot of carrot, as well as stick. They had asked themselves, "what can we give the South Africans as an incentive to get them out of Namibia?" The answer they came up with was to convince the South Africans to give Namibia its independence in return for getting the Cuban troops out of Angola. This would benefit the South Africans by eliminating the great Soviet, communist, threat to southern Africa that they were so worried about. In theory, then, Namibia would become independent without becoming communist and posing a security threat to South Africa. This strategy was called "linkage," linking the Cuban withdrawal to Namibian independence. It was a clever strategy in the sense that if it worked, the United States would win all around, both by getting the Soviet, Cuban, threat out of Southern Africa and by getting Namibia independence. This was still in the days of the Cold War, and in a sense the Namibia/Angola conflicts were partly proxy wars for the great powers. On the other hand, the strategy was much criticized internationally, because why should Namibia be held hostage to what's happening in Angola? All the black African stateand most of the worlofficially rejected linkage, although they would still talk with us about implementing it. Linkage was the policy pursued for many years by the United States, ultimately successfully, although not while I was still working on the issue.

So, we were involved in a series of negotiations with the South Africans, the Angolans, the African "Front Line States," and the UN and others. I was personally involved in a lot of these. I traveled with Crocker to Southern Africa and I always accompanied him to New York. He would go up to New York approximately every six weeks to brief the Secretary-General, who at the time was Perez de Cuellar. I probably spent more time with the Secretary-General than any of my colleagues at USUN, except Jeanne Kirkpatrick maybe.

Q: What was your impression of Crocker in the United Nations? I ask because he was coming out of a Republican administration and some other Republicans were not overly friendly to the UN. There was a whole right wing Republican element that was almost egregiously anti-UN.

EICHER: I don't think it was quite as bad then as it has become since. I mean, there was not quite as much of today's attitude of "we have to destroy the United Nations," or "let's cut the top ten floors off the UN headquarters in New York and no one will notice." You remember of course, that George Bush, the first George Bush, who was still vice president at the time we're talking about, had been ambassador to the United Nations. I think there was a realization that the UN was a useful organization, that it was one that we needed to work with. A lot of the problems between the U.S. and the UN at the time came from the outside, Jesse Helms and other members of Congress, who were withholding our UN dues, which was a real mess. You know, I think there's a widespread, general mischaracterization or misunderstanding of the UN among Americans. Everyone complains that it's ineffective or "do-nothing," but actually the UN can only do what the member states want it and allow it to do; it doesn't really have independent power to go out and do things on its own. So, often the same people who are badmouthing the UN for not doing this or thafor example, "the UN failed in Bosnia" or "the UN failed in Rwanda" are the same policy-makers who would not authorize the UN to use force in Bosnia or Rwanda. It's a bit perverse. The UN is an easy whipping boy but it really only reflects the lowest common denominator of the international community.

I think Crocker had quite a constructive approach to the UN. Just the fact that he went so often to consult with the Secretary General and other UN officials shows that he had a good approach. He accepted that the solution to Namibia had to be in the UN context, to meet UN stipulations, if it was going to work. I never remember him taking a particularly negative view.

Jeanne Kirkpatrick was ambassador in New York at that point and she was quite a powerful and difficult figure. Namibia seemed to be one of the few issues that she yielded on, for whatever reason, letting Crocker handle it by himself. I suppose she had things that mattered more to her. She just didn't get involved. Even when we saw the Secretary General, she never came along. We very rarely briefed her when we went to New York, although we would meet with some of her deputies. She was supportive of what we were doing and if we needed her occasionally to make a point in a speech, or something like that, she would do it. So I guess I was lucky compared to my colleagues in UNP, who were very scared of Kirkpatrick because she tended to get involved unpredictably in issues and she had a bad temper. Since she was a member of the Cabinet, she would go directly to the White House if anybody disagreed with her on anything. I was happy not to have her involved in my issues. I was affected peripherally as she exerted tighter and tighter control from New York over at the UN Affairs Bureau in Washington. Eventually, we could not send an instruction cable to New York from the State Department without first sending it up in draft to be approved by USUN. If they approved the draft, then we could send it officially to them. It didn't really affect me on Namibia, but it did on a few other issues, although for me this was mainly procedural can't remember an instance where USUN disagreed with something I wanted to sent them. It was really bizarre that an Ambassador would have the power to clear her own instructions, but that was just the way the system was. The assistant secretary for international organizations was more or less a nonentity.

Q: Who was that at the time?

EICHER: Gregory Newell, I believe his name was. He was a young political appointee and I think he understood what the situation was. He focused mainly on management issues at the UN and on the other UN agencies rather than on political issues at the UN as such, because clearly he was not going to be able to take control. In fact, we sometimes thought he was put there specifically to avoid having a strong assistant secretary who might clash with Kirkpatrick. I remember when I joined the Bureau making my courtesy call on Newell and him giving me his list of the Bureau's priorities. I was amazed that they were all things like cutting UN budgets and improving management; there was nothing in there at all about making peace or finding solutions to international problems or any political issues.

But I was in a funny situation. Although Newell was my assistant secretary, I really worked for Crocker. I had a good office director in UNP, Ed Dillery, and there was a good DAS, Roger Kirk. They seemed delighted to have one of their staff so deeply involved in the Namibia negotiations, so they didn't give me any trouble; they were very supportive. In general, there was so much going on in New York all the time on so many issues, that I only had to keep them very generally briefed on what was going on with Namibia.

Q: From your perspective, how did the Cuban problem fit into the situation in Angola? In the first place, what seemed to be in it for the Cubans to be fighting there and second, why would they want to get out if that's what the U.S. wanted?

EICHER: Well, that was an issue. We certainly were not dealing directly with the Cubans. They had a good-sized military establishment in Angola at that time. There were also, I believe, smaller establishments in some other parts of Africa as well, in Ethiopia and in much smaller numbers in two or three other places. This was part of their policy at the time. It was the Cold War, and the Cubans were a Soviet proxy. I have no doubt that the Soviets were paying the bills. But, even from the Cuban perspective, sending troops to somewhere like Angola, which had a Marxist government and its own civil war going on, would fit right in with the Cuban policy of trying to spread the worldwide revolution. This was after the days of Che Guevara, but the Cuban idea of trying to spread the revolution was still alive.

There was a sometimes vicious civil war going on in Angola between two of the former liberation movements which had been fighting against the Portuguese. The MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) was in power in the capital and was the official government, the ones we had to negotiate with. UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), under Jonas Savimbi, controlled the southern half of Angola and was supported by the South Africans. The U.S. was also secretly, or not so secretly, funneling assistance to UNITA. The Cubans were in Angola supporting the MPLA government. The civil war teetered back and forth. Sometimes UNITA would move north and control most of the country; sometimes it would be beaten back closer to the border region.

The Cubans were apparently very competent troops, and that worried the South Africans. The various Angolan factions were not terribly effective fighters so the South Africans didn't feel much threatened by them; they felt like they could handle the Africans without much problem. But having the Cubans there was different. The South Africans weren't scared of the Cubanthere was no threat that the Cubans themselves would try to cross into Namibia or South Africbut having the Cubans there complicated life for the South Africans. The Cubans made the MPLA stronger and threatened Savimbi. If the Cubans got to the Angolan-Namibian border, they would probably assist SWAPO in making incursions into Namibia. So, the Cubans made it a more difficult and dangerous situation for the South Africans. If Namibia were to become independent while the Cubans were in Angola, the Cubans might well be a real threat to Namibia. If Namibia were to get internationally recognized independence, the new government might even invite the Cubans into Namibia. So, even though it was the U.S., not the South Africans, which came up with the idea of "linkage," it was a real incentive to the South Africans.

Just one more fun point on the Cuban troops in Angola. The South Africans could tell where the Cubans were based in Angola through aerial photography. Suddenly, after the Cubans arrived in Angola, the aerial photos started showing that baseball diamonds were appearing at some Angolan military bases and near other concentrations of soldiers. Now, the Angola soldiers would, of course, play soccer to amuse themselves when they had free time; Africans were not baseball players. The Cubans, on the other hand, were great baseball players. So, it followed that if you saw a baseball diamond in an aerial photograph, it was a sure sign of a Cuban presence. I don't know if the Cubans ever knew they were giving themselves away in that manner, but I always thought that was an interesting story of how baseball fit into southern African diplomacy.

Q: Were there talks going on essentially between United States and Cuba over this?

EICHER: No, the talks were mainly with the South Africans and with the Angolans. I personally was never involved in the Angolan talks at all. There was an informal division of labor within the team, with the Africa Bureau's principal deputy assistant secretary, Frank Wisner, and the Angola desk officer doing most of the talks with the Angolans. Crocker and two or three others, including myself, were dealing with the South Africans and the other so-called Front Line States. And the big goal was to get what we called the "calendario," a calendar, a schedule for withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. The carrot for Angola was an independent Namibia, which would make it much more difficult for the South Africans to be able to help out Jonas Savimbi and UNITA, in their guerrilla war against the Angolan government. South African was giving assistance to Savimbi through its bases in northern Namibia. South Africa had even occupied part of southern Angola with its own troops, ostensibly to keep out the SWAPO guerrillas who would occasionally try to infiltrate from Angola into Namibia.

Anyway, the carrot for Angola was that if Namibia became independent as a result of our negotiations, then the South African forces would withdraw from both Angola and Namibia. They would be a thousand miles from Angola, where they couldn't help Savimbi as effectively. The Angolans had ostensibly brought in the Cubans on the basis that South Africa was occupying part of Angolas well as to help fight UNITand they had said at some point that they wouldn't need the Cubans to defeat UNITA if the South Africans weren't there. So, there was a real incentive for the Angolans to cooperate with the peace process, and to discuss "linkage" with us at the same time they officially rejected it.

For the two years I was on the job, the Angolans danced around very adroitly and deftly. They showed great interest in the U.S.-led negotiations and they did talk regularly with us. They never made flat rejections that would have ended the negotiations. You know, they were sufficiently involved to keep us engaged and believing that progress was possible. And, there was actually occasional progress.

The biggest breakthrough we had during my time was what we called the "disengagement." We were able to get an agreement from the South Africans to pull their troops back completely out of Angola into Namibia, and the Angolans to withdraw military from the border areas in return, and to keep the Cubans out of the border area. This agreement really was a big deal. It showed the policy was working and producing results. We thought the disengagement could create the political basis and political will and momentum to really launch into Namibian independence. This agreement was finally nailed down during a wonderful trip I took with Crocker around southern Africa, where we met half a dozen presidents. This was one of my wonderful Foreign Service experiences, being involved in a peace process that was working and meeting with a whole range of prominent leaders that I had been reading about since my university days. We met in Zambia with President Kaundl've got a great picture of him serving me teand in Tanzania with President Nyerere and in Mozambique with Samora Machel. We even went to Malawi, even though it wasn't regarded as a Front Line State, where we had an amazing meeting with President Hastings Kamuzu Banda, an ancient dictator with a twinkle in his eye, who sang us songs in an African language and quoted stanzas of Caesar in Latin. He gave us a British-style, fancy high tea in one of his palaces in Kasungu, an out-of-the-way little town; I remember that he took five sugars in his tea. I wrote up what I thought was an amusing cable on the meeting, with the subject line "Kamuzu in Kasungu;" I even mentioned his five sugars.

All these guys were old-time independence leaders who were still presidents of their various countries. Nyerere and Kaunda were the real leaders of the Front Line States, the ones who mattered most. I remember Nyerere, who we met with in Dodoma, a city in the middle of nowhere in Tanzania, being especially impressive, and especially leery of the American initiative, at the same time as he would have been delighted to see it work. We were able to go to all these out-of-the-way places because we were flying in our own little plane. The African presidents were all very pleased at the South African pull-back but cautious about whether it would really lead to independence for Namibia. Still, it was the only game in town and they admitted it was good progress. They all agreed to support our efforor at least not to oppose it. So it was a good success. They agreed to continue to pressure the Angolans for progress if we could continue to pull the South Africans back. We also met with the South Africans, of course; that was the first stop. We had to be sure they were really willing to go through with the disengagement before taking it to the Front Line States. The South Africans also produced Jonas Savimbi for us to meet with; we met him at the home of the South African minister of defense. Savimbi was an impressive fellow.

So the agreement was reached. The South Africans began to pull back their troops. And, we actually established a U.S. liaison office in Windhoek, both to monitor the disengagement and in anticipation that we would make more progress and it would turn into an embassy at the time of independence. We had discussed this with the African leaders and they didn't object. I volunteered to go out and help set up the office, USLO Windhoek (U.S. Liaison Office), the first U.S. office in Namibia, and to stay there temporarily as part of its staff. Bill Twaddell was the chargï¿½ at USLO, I was the DCM. It was just a short-term, six-week assignment but it was fascinating. I think opening any American embassy for the first time in a new country would have to be interesting. Namibia was doubly seven though it wasn't actually an embasssince it was in the middle of such a big political issue and was getting so much international attention, and because the U.S. was the only foreign country really there on the ground and involved in the negotiations. For me it was even more interesting, since I had been working on the negotiations which led to the disengagement and because I had worked on Namibia before and knew the internal scene a little, and how this fit into the bigger picture of the negotiations. USLO got a lot of publicity; there was a lot of hope that this was really going to lead to the end of the Namibian problems. Everyone was very upbeat.

Once I was at USLO, we got around Namibia quite a bit. We got up north, to the war zone and visited South African military installations. We visited Swapokmund, which was a very pretty little German colonial town that seemed like it came right out of the turn of the century, and Walvis Bay, which was Namibia's only port and was an issue in the negotiations, since it had been a South African enclave even while the rest of Namibia was a German colony. We met all the local politicians and prominent personalities, of course, many of whom were the same people I had known during my South African assignment. A lot of them were not very happy, since Namibian independence under international auspices would mean the end of influence for many who had been operating within the South African system. But there were also a lot of people pleased to see progress, at last. Also, everyone seemed to like the opening of an American office since it seemed to signal the end of a long isolation. We were in close touch with the South African military, which gave us reports to pass on their progress in pulling out of Angola. They also kept us posted on any incidents in the border region. In particular, they were upset by any indications that SWAPO would use the South African military pull-back to try to increase its incursions from Angola into Namibia. I did a lot of political reporting.

And then things began to fall apart. The Angolans still weren't producing the "calendario," which was needed if we were going to move into the next phase. And the South Africans were complaining that SWAPO was still coming in across the border. So, slowly it came unraveled. Things were still going well when I returned to the U.S. Bill Twadell and I were only there for about six weeks. The idea was that we were available immediately so we'd go out for a few weeks and get things started, then the Department would send out the longer-term team to replace us. The longer-term, or supposedly longer-term team, was headed by Dennis Keogh, who was killed within a week or so after he got there in an explosion at a gas station. It was a station that I had visited not long before. The South Africans put it down to SWAPO terrorism.

Q: This was a chance explosion or what?

EICHER: They said that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, that he wasn't actually targeted personally. But no one ever knew for sure. We speculated a lot about who would have gained from killing him, whether it was SWAPO or the South Africans. You could make a case either way, but it seemed that South Africa might have the greater incentive, and certainly they were better placed to pull something like that off, if they wanted to. Explosions in Namibia did happen from time to time, but it was relatively rare; it's not as if they were happening every day, or even every month. And SWAPO usually targeted power lines and other isolated targets away from population centers; it was rare for civilians to be hurt. SWAPO really was not an effective military force. It didn't have much capacity to undertake attacks. So I was never entirely comfortable with the idea that Keogh just happened to be somewhere when a SWAPO bomb happened to go off. It wasn't impossible, but it just seemed too unlikely, especially if it were a random bomb rather than a targeted one. It was a real tragedy. Dennis was a good guy. I had been with him just a few days before; I felt really hard hit by it. His widow later joined the Foreign Service and I got to be friends with her. Another friend was killed in the same bombing, an American army officer who had joined USLO Windhoek a couple of weeks before I left. Very sad.

The Department found a replacement for Keogh, Jake Jacobsen, who I had known during my tour in South Africa. USLO remained open for about a year altogether, then it started to become a political problem. As the disengagement fell apart, the office in Windhoek lost its nominal raison d'etre. It started to draw criticism, especially in the UN, as a U.S. diplomatic establishment that shouldn't be in Namibia until after independence. The Departmenand Crocker's "team" was divided on whether to close it or not. It still did some useful reporting, and some people were afraid that closing it would signal failure. I felt a personal attachment to the office and hated to see it closed, but in the policy discussions I argued that it should be closed; it had become more of a liability than an asset for us. Crocker agreed and so it was closed down.

Q: You've got this peace process going on over in Namibia but you haven't really said much about the Namibians. Was there a Namibian entity that was different, I mean, essentially an independent Namibian entity?

EICHER: There were a variety of things going on. In most ways, the internal situation had not progressed a lot over the past few years, I mean, it was much the same as I described it when we talked about my tour in South Africa five or six years earlier. There had been some evolution in internal politics. The old Turnhalle conference, if I remember correctly, had reached some agreements on how they would govern Namibia, and I think they had even set up a government that they were running under South African auspices. I know that they still talked a lot about declaring independencthat would be an unrecognized, South-African backed independence, and we had to spend a lot of time warning the South Africans not to let them do that since it would complicate any chance for real independence.

So, there were still all these internal parties, most of which were ethnically-based. And they did have some power over local affairs, but South Africa was still really in charge. The South Africans had started this process of trying to bring Namibia to independence in a framework that they could manage and control, which would be friendly to them, and having launched the process they were now in the unhappy position of restraining their Namibians allies who wanted to go through with independence. The racial situation was much more relaxed than in South Africa. Segregation was still generally the rule, but it was breaking down quickly and it was not at all as oppressive as in South Africa. There were more places open to all races and there wasn't the same pervasive police effort to enforce apartheid-like regulations. That was already true even back when I served in South Africa a few years earlier and it was much more so when I was there to open USLO.

SWAPO, as I've said, was the principal liberation movement. Crocker used to call it "the world's least successful liberation movement." It certainly wasn't making much progress on the battlefield but, it was recognized internationally; it had official status as a UN observer; it was regarded as legitimate. The South Africans would say that SWAPO only represented the Ovambos, which is one of the northern tribes, but by far the largest group in Namibia, making up just over half the population, I think. South Africa would have preferred a solution more like what they were trying to do within South Africa, to have an ethnically based government in Namibia that wouldn't be dominated by Ovambos, but give an equal say to a range of much smaller groups, the Hereros and the Bushmen and so forth. Curiously, SWAPO still had an internal branch that operated openly and legally inside Namibia. There were also half a dozen prominent former leaders of SWAPO and another, defunct liberation movement, SWANU (the South West African National Union) who had returned to Namibia and were cooperating with the South Africans. One of the old SWANU guys I met with, I remember, was the person who first coined the term "Namibia" as a name for South West Africa. There were a few others, as well. But most Namibians generally favored SWAPO and internationally recognized independence. It was clear that SWAPO was the most popular political force in the country and would win a free and fair election.

During the negotiations, we did meet from time to time with SWAPO, usually on our trips to New York, where we would see Theo Ben Gurirab, their UN representative and "foreign minister." Sometimes we'd meet the leader of SWAPO, Sam Nujoma, who was not very impressive or very effective. But we realized that we would need to keep SWAPO on board if the negotiations were to succeed. That wasn't really very hard to do since our goal was Namibian independence, which was also their goal. But they didn't trust us and so they would never have anything positive to say about what we were doing. We counted on the Front Line States to keep SWAPO in line if we ever needed to. I remember that Nujoma would spend most of his time traveling around Africa trying to drum up more support for SWAPO; he didn't have any clear base of operations. He certainly wasn't in the field leading any kind of military effort from Angola; he was much more of an armchair general. When we wanted to send him a message on the status of the talks or to consult with him, we would send out a cable to all African posts entitled "Where's Sam?" Eventually, one of our embassies would come back with a cable saying "he's here" and we'd be able to get a message to him.

Q: Who were the South Africans you all were dealing with? Did they see an end game? Well, I mean how were they approaching this?

EICHER: They were tough cookies. The main one that we dealt with was Pik Botha, who was the foreign minister and he was just a loud, blustery sort of fellow, with a tendency to lecture you. He had been foreign minister for a long time; I had seen him in action when I served in South Africa. He was supposedly one of the more enlightened, young Afrikaners of the Nationalist Party, but with us he put the emphasis on being tough and threatening. He always had a gang of compatriots with him, which would include a lot of senior intelligence people, you know, the head of South African military intelligence and others who would frequently be at the meetings we had with Botha. Maybe he was acting so tough for their sake. Anyway, they were always making threats, "we're going to invade Angola" and "we're going to bomb," and "why don't you guys understand that we're doing your work for you by holding off the Soviet menace, so why are you putting pressure on us?" and on and on along those kind of lines. So it was never an easy negotiation with them. And for all that, we knew that Pik Botha was probably more liberal and more inclined to a solution than his boss, P.W. Botha (no relation), the prime minister would have been. We met the South Africans in Pretoria or Cape Town, or once we had a several-day session with them in Cape Verde, which was about half way between Washington and Pretoria. The Cape Verdeans were one of the few African countries that would let the South Africans in, and it was so out-of-the-way that we could have a meeting there with no publicity. Frank Wisner used to meet the Angolans in Cape Verde, as well, sometimes. Anyway, for all the South African blustering, we thought a deal on Namibia was doable; it wasn't going to be easy but it could be doable. And ultimately, we got it done, but not while I was still working on it.

Q: You left there when?

EICHER: I left there in the middle of 1985.

Q: And wither?

EICHER: Cairo, Egypt, which was quite a change for me and the reason for the change was really more personal than political. I still liked African affairs but I had gotten to the stage where my children were too old for the American schools in Africa, which usually didn't go beyond elementary school. My oldest son, Cameron, would be going into his junior year of high school the following September and the other two boys, Nicholas and Jeremy, were also growing up. So, I turned down a little African DCM-ship since I didn't want to think about putting my kids in boarding school or going off on an unaccompanied assignment. What I really wanted was the Africa job in Londothat was a great job in a great place, following African Affairs out of the political section in London; I'm not sure the position still exists. But it wasn't coming open for another year. The Africa bureau asked met to extend in UNP, but they weren't willing to commit that I'd be their candidate for London if I did. We'd been back in the U.S. for four years already and felt like it was time to go back out. And, since my oldest son was about to start his junior year, we felt like we should either transfer now or wait another two years and let him finish high school in the States; we didn't want to move him for his senior year. So when it was time to bid, I looked around at the various possibilities. There was a job that looked interesting in the political section in Cairo. It was still Africa, even if it wasn't in the Africa Bureau. NEA (the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs) seemed like it would be an interesting area to work in, and this was one of the rare political positions in NEA that didn't require Arabic, so it wasn't a life-time commitment to the Bureau. Most important, Cairo had a good American school all the way through high school, which, as I said, was a must for us. And it just sounded like a good, fun place to go. I had lived in Cairo when I was a little boy and had left there when I was six, and we once had a lot of family members there, although not any more. So for me, there was something nostalgic about Cairo. And my wife was enthusiastic about the idea of Cairo, much more so even than I was. It was one of those exotic cities that held an allure for her and that she had always wanted to visit. So, I bid, and NEA offered me the job and I accepted.

Q: So what was your job?

EICHER: I was political officer and my portfolio was Egyptian foreign affairs. I had the only non-Arabic designated position of the six positions in the political section. I didn't have to learn the language because I would be dealing mainly with the Foreign Ministry, where everyone spoke English. My main job by far was following, and even participating in, Egypt-Israel relations. Egypt and Israel had signed the Camp David Peace Accord a few years before so they were at peace. But it was a "cold" peace. They really didn't get along at all. The U.S. had invested a lot in the peace agreement and was determined to make it work and to try to get the two counties to have better relations. I think we wanted that much more than either of them did.

There was what we called a "basket" of problem issues that continued to trouble the relationship and I spent most of my time working on those. The biggest issue by far was Taba, which was a tiny little triangle of land, only about six or eight hundred meters of coastline, right on the Sinai border between Egypt and Israel. Taba was just south of Eilat, on the Gulf of Aqaba. Under the terms the Camp David Treaty, Israel was supposed to withdraw from all of the Sinai that it occupied during the 1973 war with Egypt. Well, the Israelis had built a hotel while occupying Sinai, a Sonesta Hotel, a beautiful hotel, on a nice little beach in Taba. The Israelis insisted that "no, no. This is really part of Israel, not part of Egypt." When they withdrew from the rest of Sinai, they did not withdraw from Taba, which they said was on their side of the border. So we were trying to find a solution for the Taba problem. I ended up being deeply involved in that for five years, not only while I was in Cairo, but all through my next job, as well. The issue ultimately went to international arbitration and Taba was eventually returned to Egypt, but that was still many years of work away when I got to Cairo.

Q: What was happening with the hotel? Was it still being used by the Israelis?

EICHER: It was still being used by the Israelis, yes. In fact, this is the same hotel that had a big terrorist attack on it, I think two or three years ago, with many people killed, and the hotel wrecked. The Sonesta in Taba was at the time by far the nicest hotel in Sinai; the other places were pretty much hovels, catering mainly to backpackers and low-budget scuba divers. Since then, the Sinai has been developed with many fancy big-name hotels, but at the time the Sonesta in Taba was the only good hotel. So it was attracting tourists from Europe and from Israel. We would sometimes have our negotiating sessions right there at the hotel. While Taba was under Israeli control, they allowed topless bathing on the beach, in normal European style, which supposedly scandalized the Egyptians. At least the newspapers always made this part of their stories when they covered Taba; I never remember seeing anyone topless there, and the Egyptians negotiators certainly weren't scandalized about the idea.

Q: You were in Egypt from when to when?

EICHER: From summer 1985 until the summer of 1987.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

EICHER: Most of the first year I was there it was Nick Veliotes, until he was replaced by Frank Wisner, my old friend from Crocker's "team" in the Africa Bureau.

Q: Did the Achille Lauro thing happen while you were there?

EICHER: That happened while I was there, in fact, just a few months after I got there.

Q: Let's talk about your piece of that nasty business.

EICHER: This was in fact, one of a constant series of little crises that happened during my two years in Egypt. It seemed to be just one nasty event after another after another. All of us there in Egypt were following the Achille Lauro very closely, minute-to-minute even, but we there wasn't a lot we could do from Cairo.

Q: You might explain what this was.

EICHER: The Achille Lauro was a cruise ship, an Italian cruise ship, doing a Mediterranean cruise. It was hijacked by terrorists from a Palestinian group, the Palestine Liberation Front, I think, after it had docked in Egypt and then set sail again. They hijacked the ship and made some demands, I don't remember exactly what their demands were, probably the release of prisoners by Israel. While they held the ship, they murdered an old man named Leon Klinghoffer, an invalid in a wheelchair, who they dumped overboard. They chose Klinghoffer because he was Jewish. I do remember being in the embassy on duty as we were following this; I can't remember whether I was the duty officer or part of an embassy task force, but I was sitting in the Ambassador's office and we were trying to get news and information from the Egyptians and the Operations Center, and from other embassies and so forth. In Cairo, it was really more following it from afar than being able to do very much with it. It must have been October, because I remember Ambassador Veliotes asking us to be sure to get the latest World Series scores every time we talked to the Operations Center at State! That was before the days when you could call news up on the internet or watch CNN.

In any event, the hijackers eventually cut a deal and surrendered in exchange for safe passage to an Arab country, but while they were flying therto Tunis, in an Egyptian plane, I thinthe plane carrying them was intercepted by American jets and forced to land in Italy, where they were arrested. That strained our relations with Egypt a bit. The incident also had an effect on tourism to Egypt, and to the Middle East in general. The incident showed that the Middle East was a little less stable, that the kinds of things you did as tourists were perhaps a little less safe and a little less attractive to tourists. So, the Achille Lauro was the first of several incidents that affected Egypt that way while we were there.

I say there was a series of these things. I'm not even sure I can remember what they all were. Not long after the Achille Lauro came the downing of Pan Am flight 103, which was followed by the U.S. bombing of Libya in late 1985 or early 1986, I think. Then, later in 1986, the Israelis bombed the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) headquarters in Tunis. The PLO had moved there from Lebanon a couple of years earlier, after Israel invaded Lebanon. None of these events were centered on Cairo, but they had their effects there. It was a time of great turmoil in the Middle East. The bad atmosphere made it hard to generate any movement in the peace process or on the littler issues I was dealing with. And, again, it all affected tourism, which was suffering very much in Egypt during the time I was there. Having all the hotels and markets empty was actually a bit of an advantage for those of us living therthere were discounts on Nile cruises and hotels, and the country wasn't crawling with touristbut it was very hard for the Egyptians.

The biggest event from the political perspective was the Egyptian police riots, which happened while we were there. It was the spring of 1986. The Egyptian security system at the time included a huge police force, which, like the army, was staffed with conscripts. The police were second class citizens compared to the army, so you had this enormous group of very young, poor, uneducated, conscripted, armed policemen all over the country, carrying guns and wearing black uniforms. These poor young guys would stand outside government buildings and on street corners, and even in front of the American school all day. It was incredibly boring and ill-paid work, in the Cairo heat and dust. At one point when we were there, one of the policemen in front of the American school fell asleep on his gun and shot himself by mistake. That caused an uproar among the Americans and the embassy asked that the bullets be taken out of their guns. In any case, if you were a better-off Egyptian, you would find a way to get into the army rather than the police. So the police force was really made up from the lower classes, generally not well educated, and they received very poor payment and very poor conditions of service. So, in the spring of 1986, they rioted. I think the riots were sparked by a rumor that the term of service for conscripts in the police force was going to be extended from one year to two years.

The riots were very dangerous for the government and for everybody. Right in downtown Cairo there were gun battles in the streets. The army finally came in and put the riots down but it took many hours for them to regain control. The embassy went into lockdown, with armed guards everyplace. We couldn't travel back to our homes because the streets weren't safe. We finally were able to get back home to the suburbs late in the evening after the army organized a military convoy for us, led and followed by armored vehicles. There was a curfew and the streets were blocked off. Meanwhile, while we were stuck in the embassy, back in the suburbs there was also fighting and rioting, right around the American School. We lived only about two or three houses away from the school and my wife ended up with a house full of kids who took refuge in our place rather than try to get to their own houses further away. My wife went and shepherded them out of the school and through the gunfire to the house. Really, it was quite an experience. Things did calm down finally and got back to normal again, but it took a while. I think the embassy was closed for several days, and they even organized convoys to the commissary so people could buy food. Tourism never did recover in my two years in Cairo. All in all, it was quite an event and perhaps the biggest threat to Mubarak during all his many years in power before and since.

Then there was yet another terrorist incident in Cairo, targeting embassy personnel, which hit very close to us. The embassy RSO (Regional Security Officer), Dennis Williams, who was a very close friend and neighbor of ours, and a couple of other friends were driving to work one morning down the same route that we all took every day to get to work when his car was attacked by a well organized group of terrorists. There were apparently two or three little groups of shooters, some in a car and some on the roadside, who tried to run them off the road and shoot them. Denny Williams was drivinfortunately, because as RSO he had had all kinds of training in defensive driving in such situationand he was able to head them off and pull the car out of danger. But, he didn't get away until he himself and one of the other had been shot, each of them slightly wounded in the head. Another inch or two and they would have been killed. The car was a wreck, full of bullet holes. It's amazing they escaped. The incident really shook up the Embassy community, of course, and led to lots more security measures. It shook us up as well, since we were so close to Denny and his family. It was my wife who went and got his kids out of school that day. I guess we realized it could have been any of us. I passed along the same road, that same morning, in a different embassy vehicle. I believe they eventually caught the terrorist cell that did it, which apparently was busy planning another attack on embassy personnel.

So, there were many incidents while we were there that put the Egyptians, and the international community, and us, on edge. After saying all this, I guess I should add that despite all the incidents, we did generally feel safe in Cairo. It was not a high crime city and in general we would walk the streets and do what we wanted without any particular fear. In fact, walking around the neighborhood after dark, the main thing we had to worry about were dogs. Maadi, the suburb where all the embassy families lived, had lots of stray dogs which would lie around quietly in the daytime, but then at night they would gather and run in little packs and might attack people. So, we used to carry long bamboo canes, which were actually designed to drive camels with, when we walked at night, in case any hostile dogs turned up. Sometimes the problem got so bad that the embassy would partner with the local police to go around and shoot the dangerous strays at night. I believe the embassy supplied the ammunition and the truck to pick up the carcasses.

Q: What was your impression of the staffing and the attitude of the foreign office officials, the Egyptian ones?

EICHER: They were amazingly competent, amazingly good at what they did. It seemed like all of them had been educated at Oxford or Cambridge. They spoke English as well as we did, to the point that they could conduct negotiations in English, down to the point of correcting grammar and so forth. So, they were really first-class professionals. A couple of the people I dealt with from time to time later ended up as foreign ministers even. It was quite something. They were all friendly and accessible, because Egypt's relations with the U.S. were very good at the time. But there was sometimes an undercurrent of hostility that the U.S. was really siding with Israel more than Egypt, which, I guess, was true. And, a lot of them had come of age during the Nasser years, so while they were friendly, you could sometimes get the feeling that they were not as pro-Western as their government's official policy was.

Because foreign affairs and the Arab-Israeli conflict were my portfolio, I ended up spending a lot of time taking notes in very high-level meetings. From the Washington point of view, the most important part of our relations with Egypt was ensuring that it remained in a good relationship with Israel. There were a lot of meetings with President Mubarak, a lot of meetings with his foreign minister, Abdel Meguid, and a lot of meetings with Boutros Ghali, who at that time was deputy foreign minister. I got to know them a little and got to know their staffs quite well.

There was an endless string of high level American visitors to Egypt, as well. That kept me very busy because I was constantly appointed as control officer. Since most of the official visitors to Egypt said the main reason they were coming was to discuss the peace process, it always seemed to be, "Eicher, this one is yours." I actually kept track and in a two-year touabout a hundred weekl was control officer fifty times, for fifty visitors or delegations! Many of these visits were for the Taba negotiations, but there were lots of others, tocodels and staffdels and visitors from the Department and others. I spent an enormous amount of time on visitors, which had the advantage of getting me into lots of high-level meetings, where the action was. But it had the disadvantage of having many, many weekends taken up with visitors.

Q: During the time you were there, how stood relations between Egypt and Israel and were there any developments during your time?

EICHER: There was definitely a peace process, or a so-called peace process, underway but it wasn't really going anyplace. It was more smoke and mirrors. I came to understand the importance of having a process to point to and that it's better to have something than nothing even if it's not going anyplace. If there were no peace process, there would be no hope, and violence would be the only alternative left open for people unhappy with the current situation. So, with great fanfare, there was a lot of effort to move things forward or at least to make them look like they were moving forward. At the time, much of the time I was in Egypt, there was a Likud government in Israel, or a national unity government including Likud, and things just weren't moving. The Israelis didn't seem terribly serious about the peace process. Egypt, for its part, could have done much more, as well. You know, Egypt seemed to sort of take the attitude "OK, we recognized Israel, we are at peace. What more could you possibly want from us? This can't be a warm relationship as long as our Arab colleagues don't join in, and as long as the Israelis keep mistreating the Palestinians." The Israelis took the opposite view. They felt like they had given up Sinai for peace with Egypt, but all they had gotten was a "cold peace, with no friendliness or goodwill in the relationship. Often, it felt like we Americans wanted a solid peace more than either of them did.

As I said, there was this "basket" of Egypt-Israel issues that I was working on, in addition to Taba, that were supposedly the sticking points in the relationship. They were interesting things that were passably important but which, I think, to a large extent were used as excuses by one side or the other not to move forward on other things or to score political points about who was being flexible. One was a monastery in Jerusalem called Deir Sultan. Actually "monastery" is too strong a word. It's sort of a very small couple of structures on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, really a couple of rooms. It had been the property of the Egyptians Copts and, I think, after the 1967 War the Israelis had given it to the Ethiopian Copts, who maintained possession. The Egyptians were insisting that Deir Sultan be given back to the Egyptian Copts. You can imagine how useful and productive it would be for the U.S. to get involved in the question of which denomination owned what portion of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. You know, this was going to go nowhere. I don't know if they've resolved it yet. That whole church is a political bombshell. It's supposedly built on the site where Jesus was crucified and the tomb in which his body was laid. The Church is controlled by three of four different denominationGreek Othodox, Armenian Orthodox and Catholic, I think. They can't even agree with each other to make necessary repairs, so, for the holiest site in Christendom, the church is really kind of a mess. Anyway, we had a lot of discussions about that that didn't produce anything.

There were a few other issues, too. One was an Israeli submarine that had sunk or been sunk in Egyptian waters during one of the Egypt-Israeli wars. The Israelis wanted permission to search for it so they could recover the remains of their sailors; the Egyptians thought this was just an excuse for the Israelis to spy in Egyptian waters around Alexandria. I think we did finally get permission for a search but I can't recall if they found it. There was also a dispute over a Jewish cemetery in Cairo. The Egyptians wanted to bulldoze part of it because it was in the path of a highway they wanted to build; the Israeli saw this as desecration. The cemetery was an incredibly run-down place, with people living in it. Squatters were actually setting up housekeeping inside the rundown mausoleums, as they also do in the Islamic cemeteries in Cairo. We got involved in a possible solution that would have the highway built over the cemetery on narrow pillars, so that the cemetery could be left largely intact. Yet another issue was a few missing Israeli servicemen from the wars; the Israelis didn't think the Egyptians were doing enough to try to locate and return the remains. There were a couple of other issues like that, as well, but I don't recall what they were. To have the Americans involved in all these little bilateral issued was, I guess, a good demonstration of both how weak the bilateral relationship was despite the peace treaty, and the extent to which the U.S. was up to its ears in trying to make the relationship work.

Q: It seems like, in a way, that maybe the Egyptians and the Israelis both got what they wanted but their constituencies kept these things going because certainly a hotel or a couple of rooms don't sound like world shaking issues.

EICHER: No, they shouldn't be world shaking issues. And, I think the Israelis in particular were disappointed. They felt like they had already given up all of the Sinai, which was important to them. There were even Israeli settlements in Sinai that they had to dismantle. So, sure, they should never have been built settlements in occupied territories in the first place, but the Israelis believed they had really made that sacrifice for peace and were not getting a real peace in return. The Egyptians, for their part, you know, they would point to Sadat having been assassinated and how they had been ostracized from the Arab world, so they felt they also made sacrifices for peace. On the other hand, the Egyptian leadership when I was there, Mubarak, certainly didn't seem to be a Sadat in terms of having a vision and of really wanting to change things and have a warm, friendly peace with Israel. The attitude seemed more like "how little can we do without upsetting the Americans too much?"

Q: What was your impression of our presence in Egypt?

EICHER: At the time I was there, Cairo was the biggest American embassy in the world. That was mainly because of the enormous aid programs, both military aid and civilian aid, which began after the Camp David accords. So there was a huge USAID mission and a huge military assistance mission, which actually dwarfed the size of the State Department portion of the Embassy. Both of those were our biggest programs in the world outside of Israel. For Israel, I think our aid program was mainly a question of writing checks rather than actually administering programs, like in Egypt. So it was a very big, very high profile kind of American presence. Essentially, the American relationship with Egypt was a good relationship. The Egyptians seemed to like us, they seemed to welcome us. They realized that they were getting positive things out of the relationship. And, the Egyptians are very hospitable, friendly people. So, I think, all in all, it was a good relationship.

Q: Looking at foreign relations, what were you getting about Egyptian Libyan relations?

EICHER: It was certainly not a front burner issue. Egypt's relations with Libya were strained because of the peace with Israel, and maybe over other issues as well, but I don't really recall any big problems at the time. I think the Egyptians regarded Qaddafi as kind of a nut case, as we did. They would try to explain to us how to understand the Libyans.

Q: Was the Non-Aligned movement still in place or had that gone?

EICHER: It continued to exist but not in the same kind way it might have ten or twenty years before, under Nasser. As we looked at Egyptian foreign-policy, it could be described as sort of concentric circles. The inner circle, the most important, was Egypt's place as part of the Arab world; those were the most important issues to the Egyptians. The next circles were the Egyptian place as part of the Islamic world and as part of Africa. Egypt was interested in African affairs and played a part, but it wasn't really at the center of their foreign policy. In the UN context, Egypt was part of the African group, since there is no Middle East group at the UN.

Q: Did Egypt have much reach within the Arab world at that time or were they still being basically boycotted?

EICHER: I think the boycott was beginning to break down. I don' t think the Arab League had moved back to Cairo yet, which had been its headquarters before. But Egypt was, and still is, I guess, far and away the biggest Arab country in population and economy too, I think, if you put oil aside. So I think Egypt was just a country people had to deal with. The Egyptians knew they would be fully reintegrated into the Arab world sooner or later; they were just too important to be left out permanently. I can't remember when the Arab League moved back to Egypt. But Egypt certainly was involved with the other Arab countries and with the Palestinians. The Egyptians were always trying to broker a peace between the U.S. and the Palestinians because, at the time, we were not yet speaking to the PLO at all. The PLO was a terrorist group that, as a matter of U.S. policy, we couldn't deal with. I remember many meetings at which the foreign minister was trying to convince American visitors that the PLO was really very moderate and giving us the names of PLO leaders that we ought to be meeting with, in particular Abu Mazen, who is now President Abbas.

Q: Did you have any dealings with the Israeli Embassy?

EICHER: Yes. I was meeting with the Israelis all the time. Since my job centered on Egypt-Israel affairs, we always had things to work on together, all the issues I talked about before. I got to know them all.

Q: How would you describe the Israelis at the embassy, both the operation and their attitude in a semi-hostile area?

EICHER: They were one frustrated bunch. It was a very small embassy, only three or four substantive people. And, you know, they were trying to operate as a normal embassy but they just did not feel like they were getting anything done. And, of course, they had to be very careful about the security situation. I think there were a couple of attacks on the Israeli embassy or its personnel.

Q: Did Egypt and the United States get involved in African issues together?

EICHER: Not in any significant way that I can remember, no. I know that we were dealing with the Egyptians to support the Afghan rebels against the Soviets at that time, funneling assistance through them. This was more of an intelligence operation than a State Department one, so it was not something that was coming across my desk as a work item, but I did hear it mentioned and it was one of the types of cooperation that we were involved in with Egypt. I don't remember any African operations. I remember that there were occasionally African issues I would deal with since I remember going to meet the foreign ministry people who dealt with Africa, but I can't remember what issues, probably Chad, if I had to guess.

Q: How was life there?

EICHER: Life was wonderful. Life was really very nice. There was a very good American School and nice housing, once we finally found a place. There was a friendly population, wonderful things to see and do, good food, nice bazaars. The kids made friends and were involved in little league and soccer teams and all the kinds of activities you can have in a place with a big American community. My oldest son got very involved in stagecraft at the school. He graduated from high school there, in a great ceremony at the pyramids. My middle son was much involved in boy scouts and used to like to go camping in the desert. The kids were all involved in something called the "24 hour marathon," a very neat event at the school where teams of kidand adults, evewould run relay laps for 24 consecutive hours. My wife got a job she really liked as activities director at the Maadi house, the embassy recreation facility. There were lots of excursions to take to the pyramids and many lesser known ancient ruins near Cairo, plus mosques, and ancient Christian Cairo and sailing on the Nile and other things to do. The bazaar was great; my wife would never get tired of going there. There were also longer trips to the beach, to the Sinai, to upper Egypt. We also went to Alexandria a few times; I was acting consul general there for a few days when the CG was away. We took a trip to Israel, driving there, which was very unusual at the time, with some other embassy friends. We went for Christmas in 1986 and spent Christmas Eve in Bethlehem, which we found to our surprise was more like Grand Central Station than like "silent night, holy night." In fact, that was the last year before the first intifadah, or Palestinian uprising. After that, it was no longer possible to do that visit for many years because of the unrest in the occupied territories. So, we really loved life in Egypt. It is really very, very nice indeed.

Q: After that where did you go?

EICHER: After that we went back to the United States again. I had been selected to be the special assistant for the Middle East peace process, which sounded exciting to me. The peace process didn't look as if it was really going anywhere, but it was always fun to be in the middle of big political events, and Arab-Israeli affairs are always right up there near the top of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. I was just about to leave Cairo to go back to the States when I got a call from the Department saying "Eicher, we want you to be the deputy director of Egyptian affairs." Well, that was an honor and I couldn't really say no to NEA (the Bureau of Near Eastern and North African Affairs), which was now my "home" bureau. But I did say that I had really been looking forward to starting the peace process job. "Don't worry," they said, "we are combining the two jobs and you're going to have both jobs, so you'll wear two hats." So, I went back as the deputy director of Egyptian affairs, but the biggest part of my job was to work on the Middle East peace process. So it was kind of the best of both worlds. It was a very nice position. NEA/EGY (the office of Egyptian affairs) was an office of five people. So, I had some supervisory duties and some general and administrative issues and all the other many things that come up on a country desk. But, most of each day I spent working on Middle East peace process issues.

Q: You did that from when to when?

EICHER: From summer 1987 to summer 1990.

Q: Who was the director?

EICHER: The Director of Egyptian Affairs was Tezi Schaeffer for the first two years and then Melinda Kimble after that. The front office was a changing variety of people. There was a deputy assistant secretary (DAS) for the peace process, who was Bill Kirby for most of the time I was there. There was also a DAS responsible for Egypt and other countries, Ned Walker. So, depending on what issue I was dealing with, I would be reporting to a different DAS, which was a bit unusual. Eventually, I think the last year I was there, the two DAS positions were combined, and Dan Kurtzer came in to fill the combined position. The NEA Assistant Secretary for most of my tenure was Richard Murphy, who was eventually replaced briefly by Ed Djerejian and then by John Kelly. So this included a lot of big names who were fun to work with.

Q: During this time, let's take first Egyptian affairs. Were there any particular developments?

EICHER: There was always a lot going on with Egypt; it was a very broad and deep bilateral relationship. On the desk I got a much broader view than I did from the embassy, where I had a compartmentalized portfolio. Cairo was still the biggest American embassy in the world and our foreign assistance program to Egypt was the second biggest in the world, after Israel. We had a wide range of economic issues to deal with, an IMF program that seemed to be in trouble a lot. There were many political-military issuewe were reaching an agreement for the Egyptians to manufacture Abrams tanks. The Egypt desk seemed to have an unusually close relationship with the embassy in Cairo, keeping them informed every day of what was going on in Washington on their issues. Of course, these were the same people I had been working with in Cairo on my last tour, so it was easy to keep working with them. We also had a close relationship with the Egyptian Embassy and worked with them a lot. There were lots of bilateral visits in both directions, so we always seemed to be briefing someone. There was even a state visit by President Mubarak, which was, of course, a tremendous amount of work. The Mubarak visit sticks in my mind mainly because all of us on the desk were invited to the White House. We didn't make the cut for the state dinner itself, but, we were invited to come later to join for the after dinner entertainment and dancing. It was a very elegant evening and a fun experience. I remember that there were lots of people crowding around President Reagan trying to shake hands or get a word with him, but Vice President Bush was wandering around by himself looking a little lost, so I went and struck up a little conversation with him.

Anyway, I'm digressing a bit. The biggest Egyptian issue I ended up spending a lot of time on while I was on the desk was Taba, which, of course, I was very familiar with from having worked so much on it in Cairo. The Taba issue entered a more intense level of activity after I left Egypt.

Q: Couldn't we just turn it over to the Hilton Corporation?

EICHER: It would seem to me that for the amount of time and effort we spent on Taba we could've bought the darned thing ourselves. What happened was that the Egyptians and Israeliwith a lot of American help and cajolinfinally agreed to an international arbitration to resolve the problem. So, first, we were involved in long and detailed negotiations surrounding the terms for the arbitration. The State Department's legal adviser at the time was a gentleman named Abe Sofaer. Judge Sofaer, as he liked to be called, took a great personal interest in the Taba question and dove into it head first. Once the two sides agreed to the terms of the arbitration, and the arbitration process was actually underway, Sofaer's goal was to try to get them to set aside the arbitration and to agree to conciliation instead. That is, conciliation would be an out-of-court settlement, and the idea was that if they could agree on an out-of-court settlement before the arbitration decision came in, everybody would be happier. It would show that the two countries could actually work together to resolve an important issue, which would build confidence to help resolve other problems, thus promoting better bilateral relations and a stronger bilateral peace than if one side won and one side lost. So, for most of the three years I was on the desk, it seemed that I was constantly jet-setting with Judge Sofaer back and forth between Washington and Cairo and Jerusalem doing these Taba negotiations, which was fascinating.

The negotiations themselves were interesting, with lots of legal and political issues, but even more so was how they reflected the troubled relationship between the two countries. Taba was a huge issue in the relationshieven more a symbolic issue than a territorial onso the top people on both sides were actively involved. On almost ever trip we were meeting with the Israeli prime minister, Perez and then Shamir, and with Rabin, who was defense minister at the time. We even had lunch with all of them together in the Israeli cabinet room one tima very informal affair, with everyone stabbing pieces of chicken off a big plate in the middle of the cabinet table, with no niceties like asking the guests to serve themselves first. On the Egyptian side, the foreign minister was heavily involved. So, through the Taba negotiations we had a very special window on to the relationship and the personalities. It was fascinating to witness and to be involved in.

Q: Let me get this straight. You have a peace agreement, lines are drawn. All of a sudden you get this little exclusion there. I would think that anybody sensible would think that essentially the Israelis said, "Well, we like this and we're not going to give it up," and that if there is arbitration, it's obviously going to go to Egypt. Was that sort of the feeling on our part or what?

EICHER: Pretty much so, but with some nuances and lots of complications. The Israelis, first of all, didn't claim that they wanted it; they claimed that, in fact, it was always theirs. The location of the actual borderline was no longer clearly marked after the Israelis took over the Sinai in 1967; a lot of the border markers had been destroyed or removed or just disappeared over time. Remember, we're only talking about a few hundred yards here and it was a few hundred yards of barren beachfront that was completely undeveloped until the hotel was built. There were no inhabited dwellings or any population that could say "look, this is my house and it was in Egypt before the war." So, theoretically at least, there was room for dispute about exactly where the border line ran. The physical descriptions of the border that were made years before, when it was demarcated as the border between Egypt and British Palestine, were vague enough that they could be subject to different interpretations. I remember that one of the key landmarks in descriptions of the border was a "rocky knoll" near the shore of the Gulf of Aqaba. But that coastline has more than one rocky knoll. So even thought the preponderance of the evidence seemed to be on the Egyptian side, there was room for the Israelis to make a case. The Israelis also tried to inject the issue of equity into the talks; that is, the judgment should take into consideration how much they had improved the territory and so forth. The Egyptians totally rejected the equity argument.

It took us months even to negotiate the actual question to be arbitrated. If I remember correctly, the final agreement on the question be arbitrated was basically a victory for the Egyptians. The arbitrators were to determine "the location of the pillars that marked the border between Egypt and mandated Palestine." This basically reflected the Egyptian view that the Taba issue was strictly a territorial question and if you could determine where the pillars were, that would resolve the problem. It was also a nice little jab at the Israelis, since it didn't even mention the existence of Israel; only of British Palestine. A concession to the Israelis was that the arbitration wouldn't just be Taba, but it would look at the entire border, all the way from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aqaba. It was almost all empty desert; there were no fences along much of the border. As I recall, about 89 pillars had been erected to mark that border; a lot of them were still standing but many had disappeared. So the Egyptians and Israelis could present evidence to the arbitrators in regard to all the border markers, although Taba was by far the preeminent issue. It just took forever to get this agreement on the arbitration. And then we went into the conciliation effort, which, I think, had some attractions for both sides, at least enough to keep them seriously engaged. But ultimately, neither side could bring itself to make the concessions needed for conciliated agreement. It was easier for them, politically, to wait for the arbitration judgment and then say "we were forced to do this," than to come to a happy agreement that involved even minor concessions.

Meanwhile, Israel at this time had a power-sharing government between its two major parties, the Likud and Labor. For first two years of the coalition government Perez was prime minister and then he rotated out for the last two years and Shamir became prime minister, but always with both sides in the government. It was incredible trying to deal with the Israelis under these circumstances because you would meet with one set of people and they would absolutely assure you that this is the Israeli position and then you would meet with the other half of the government and they would tell you something totally different. The Egyptians just couldn't have been more frustrated about this and sometimes put it down to Israeli bad faith, but they understood the political situation in Israel enough to know that it was a real problem. We were also often frustrated with the inability of the Israelis to come up with a common position. Sometimes, well, often, we would get the two groups of Israelis in the same room togethesometimes with the Egyptians there alsand the Israeli delegation then would squabble among themselves right in front of us and the Egyptians and never reach a conclusion. At times it didn't seem like this was going anywhere and we should just let the arbitration run its course. But, Sofaer was determined to try to push the conciliation and I guess he was right that if they could've agreed, then maybe it would've been better for them to have an out-of-court agreement. So, anyway, it went on for a very long time. I learned an awful lot about international arbitrations.

Q: Who was running the arbitration?

EICHER: There was a panel of three arbitrators. Each side picked one and then those two picked the third one. I can't remember their names. We went through many different formulas before they agreed to this. Once they each chose their arbitrator, we put together a list of three to five others for those to choose from and they were finally able to agree. In the end, the arbitrators awarded Taba to Egypt and the Israelis withdrew. Israel did get rulings in its favor on two or three pillars elsewhere, in the middle of the desert, so they may have gotten a few yards of Sinai desert here and there in exchange for Taba. It was basically an Egyptian victory. The whole thing unnecessarily soured Egyptian-Israeli relations for years and contributed to the "cold peace." But, with the return of Taba, the withdrawal provisions of the Camp David peace were finally completed.

In any case, that's what I spent a lot of my time on while I was deputy director of the Egypt desk, Taba.

But, I also was able to spend a lot of time on the broader Middle East peace process. I was part of the small team at the Department that was trying to develop strategy about how to move things forward, or at least how to make it look like it was moving forward. Perception was very important. You had to have a process out there that looked like it had a chance of progress, or else the only alternative left was confrontation or violence.

On the more mundane level, I spent a tremendous amount of time writing talking points on the Middle East peace process because it seemed like every U.S. official in every meeting in every part of the world, always had to say something about the Middle East peace process and somebody had to tell him or her what to say. Since events on the ground changed slightly from week to week, I had this never ending job of making sure that whoever was speaking to whoever had precisely the right nuances to draw upon. I also did regular wrap-up cables to all diplomatic posts to be sure that our ambassadors were up to date on what to say when they met with foreigners. And, whenever a foreign embassy in Washington wanted a Middle East update, they would be referred to me, so I ended up getting to know lots of the embassy people around Washington, plus a lot of think tank people, who were always working on the Middle East.

Q: I was interviewing a lady who was a speechwriter for Secretary of State Christopher and she said that you had to be very careful because if in a speech you put glad instead of happy or happy instead of glad, this could mean something.

EICHER: It could. In the Middle East it was really something. You really had to learn the current formulas just right or you would step in a minefield and offend someone. Just as one example, if you said "the legitimate rights of the Palestinians" instead of "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" the Arabs would worry that the U.S. was taking a step backwards and no longer considered the Palestinians to be "a people," which had ramifications for their claim to an independent state, whicat that poinwe didn't even recognize yet. Anyway, there were a lot of little things like that, and people were always getting themselves into trouble with one side or the other if they didn't stick closely to my talking points.

We did have one peace process breakthrough while I was working on the issue. We finally started talking to the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization). For years the United States had refused to do this, since we regarded the PLO as a terrorist organization. This complicated any peace negotiations, of course, since you couldn't meet with or speak directly to one of the major parties to the conflict. So, there was a long, careful, back channel negotiation, through intermediaries, to break through this barrier. I personally was not involved in this, except a little bit at the Washington end. The goal was to get Yassir Arafat's agreement to renounce terrorism, in exchange for which we would open a dialogue with him and include him and the PLO in the peace talks. The deal was carefully negotiated. Arafat agreed to give a public speech on a set date at which he would renounce terrorism. Then it was choreographed that we would make our announcement of opening a dialogue with the PLO. I remember sitting there together with the Middle East peace process crew, I think in the NEA assistant secretary's office, listening to Arafat give his speech. CNN or somebody was covering it live. He was speaking in heavily accented, broken English. When he got to the crucial line, he was supposed to say "I renounce terrorism," but he actually said, quite clearly, "I denounce terrorism," which is quite a different statement. We all looked at each other and thought "oh, no, he blew it." Then, I think it was Dick Murphy, the assistant secretary who said, with a twinkle in his eye, "I heard him say it." And we all nodded our heads knowingly and agreed, okay, Arafat had renounced terrorism. So we opened our discussions with the PLO, finally. That actually did eventually lead to real progress and it was the start of the current, sometimes erratic negotiations with the Palestinians.

Q: Did you feel the hand of AIPAC (the American-Israeli Political Action Committee), or other American Jewish organizations or other organizations including right wing Christians from Congress or outside powerful pressure groups?

EICHER: Absolutely. I mean, this is just part of the landscape you had to deal with. You never wanted to upset AIPAC but, generally, administration policy was such that it wouldn't upset AIPAC, so it usually wasn't a problem in practice, although it did limit options for creative thinking and new directions. Again, the goal of the negotiations was often this idea of trying to keep something going, of just pushing and pushing, partly to make it look like something was happening, but also in hopes that maybe something actually would happen. It was important to have something out there in the form of a negotiating process that could attract people, so that violence wasn't the only answer. Of course, we were also pushing for a real solution, but often it seemed that the U.S. was more interested in a solution than the parties on the ground were. We had to keep reminding ourselves that it wouldn't work if we wanted peace more than they did. So, perhaps that's why it was called a process; it would go on and on. We'd keep trying to come up with new ideas, new approaches, to keep the parties engaged and to step forward, even in small ways. This sounds minimalist, but over time it has worked, at least to some extent. There's now peace between Israel and Jordan, as well as Egypt. The Palestinians are now actively engaged in the process. All the main players now accept a Palestinian state as a goal. So, the problem is far from solved; it's still a very dangerous place; but, you can see some progress in small steps, over time, and this is a result of keeping a process going.

I want to mention one trip out to the region with Secretary George Schultz which was tremendously interesting to me. Usually, I would not accompany the secretary on his travels. But, this time Dennis Ross was on leave because his wife was having a baby and they asked me if I would go on the trip instead, which I happily did. Ross later spent years as the special envoy for Middle East negotiations, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, but at the time I was working on the issue Ross was first on the Secretary's policy planning staff working on the Middle East, and then at the NSC (National Security Council). Anyway, I hopped on the secretary's planwhich was an interesting experience in itseland started with him on a Middle East mission. It was Easter time and we went first to Rome. I guess he liked to stop at the Vatican at Easter time. We had an audience with the Pope, John Paul II, who blessed our mission. That was quite a treat; in addition to the audience, we got an inside tour of the Vatican which took us to places not open to the public. Then we flew out to Israel. As we neared Israel, we were escorted by a bunch of Israeli fighter jets, which flew in formation just a few feet off our wing tips on each side, dangerously close, I thought; they were really hot-dogging. Anyway, it was Easter day and in the morning we were in Rome and in the evening we were in Jerusalem, which was quite a memorable Easter.

Then, we had a very intense couple of days of meetings in the region. I was supposed to stay in Jerusalem with most of the delegation while Shultz went on with a very small team to Jordan and Syria, but late the night before his departure they decided to include me in that part of the trip, in the place of someone else who suddenly had to stay in Israel. That was great, except that they forgot to inform me about it! So, early the next morning I was still peacefully sawing wood in my hotel room when I was woken up by a call to say I had missed the motorcade and had better get myself in gear since the plane was due to depart in half an hour. It seemed impossible, since it would take longer than that to get to the airport. But I rushed like crazy and they had a car waiting for me which broke all the speed records down the windy road from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv and I stumbled on to the plane just before they closed the door.

I'm glad I made it because it turned out to be one of my most memorable Foreign Service trips, to Amman and Damascus in one day, to meet with King Hussein and President Hafez al-Assad. There was a striking contrast in the two capitals. King Hussein was the urbane, friendly, polished Western-style king in his beautiful palace, which is really just a very nice, large house. There was even a tricycle out in the driveway. We sat around his elegant living room, which was light and airy and wonderfully decorated with beautiful rugs and talked about how to promote the peace process. He gave us a wonderful lunch right there in the house, many courses; I remember that he was served something different, and much lighter, than the rest of us. Then we were off to Damascus where we received by President Assad in a joyless, windowless, undecorated room with Assad sitting in a sort of throne at the head of the room and the U.S. delegation sitting in rank order in easy chairs all the way down one side of the room and the Syrian delegation in rank order all the way down the other side of the room. The atmosphere was very formal and grim, in stark contrast to Amman. The embassy warned us that Assad meetings usually last hours; it's not unusual for them to last five hours or more. They warned us that they'll start serving you tea and coffee and juice as soon as you sit down, so be moderate in what you take because you can't get up and leave the room unobtrusively the way it is set up. The meeting was all done with consecutive interpretation, although Assad clearly spoke English, since he kept correcting the interpreters. After about two hours it was clear we had said all we needed to say and heard all we needed to hear, so the secretary edged up to the end of his chair, buttoned his jacket and was clearly getting ready to go. The whole American side of the room, you know, followed suit and we were all sitting up on the edge of our chairs ready to go. Assad looked a Shultz and said, "You Americans are always in such a hurry. Where are you going that's so much more important?" So, Shultz said, "I'm not going anywhere," and settled back down in his seat, and the rest of us also sat back down. The meeting continued for another hour or hour and a half. We finally got up and left after about three hours or so, a little over three hours, and the embassy people told us it was one of the shortest meetings ever with President Assad.

Q: Did we have a plan? I mean there was one time when Schultz came out with a plan that Assad shot down.

EICHER: We must've had some kind of plan that we were presenting, but I can't remember specifically what it was. It's interesting because I was just thinking, what was the substance of this trip? And I cannot really remember; I'll have to try and go back and see if I still have notes from that era. If there was a plan I don't think it was ever one that we really expected to be the great Middle East breakthrough. It was more of a holding operation. I think it would be fair to say we had an approach rather than a plan. During my years the approach was usually to try to encourage confidence-building measures on both sides, before trying to tackle the much more difficult "final status issues." So, we were leaning on the Israelis to do things like rein in settlements and on the Arabs to take steps to begin dialogue with Israel.

Q: During the time that you were dealing with this process, were the Israelis on a fairly aggressive path of changing the geography, as far as putting in settlements? In a way, it seemed like every time we negotiate the Israelis are simply gobbling up territory.

EICHER: It was happening then, as well, and it was certainly an impediment to the peace process then as it is now. Absolutely. There were lots of impediments to the process. In fact, the first intifada started soon after I began working on the peace process; I think it was in the fall of 1987. I was actually in Israel at the time with Judge Sofaer. We had hoped to go to visit Bethlehem on a Saturday morning but then we were told that there was some rioting near there and so we probably shouldn't go, and we didn't. Well, in fact, there was rioting and it spread and became the beginning of the first intifada. After that, it became much more difficult to visit the territories.

Q: This was described as sort of the children's intifada, I mean with rocks. You know, it was spontaneous and difficult for the Israelis to deal with because these were kids.

EICHER: Certainly a lot of them were kids but I think there were also plenty of adults. The unrest took off and spread and lasted quite some time. Eventually, it calmed down but then started up again later.

Q: Did you have any feel for any Jewish influence in this whole process? We obviously have a significant Jewish element in the State Department and in the government. Sofaer sounds as though it might be a Jewish name.

EICHER: He was certainly Jewish.

Q: Did this ever play as a factor? How did this go?

EICHER: Well, it was no secret and it was part of the general background, but it was not something that anyone seemed much concerned with. U.S. policy was so pro-Israeli that the overall image was the same, whether the actors of the moment were Jews or Christians. As far as I know, we didn't have any American Muslims working on the peace process, or even in the State Department. Sofaer, was an example of a Jew who, I think, was if anything harder on the Israelis than on the Egyptians. One of the people who I worked closely with, Dan Kurtzer, was an Orthodox Jew who ended up being named ambassador to Egypt and then to Israel; he was a wonderful guy, well respected all around. So, no, I don't think that was a problem in practice.

Q: This wasn't seen as a bias factor or something like that?

EICHER: The Egyptians and Arabs probably saw it that wasometimes, at leasbut from the U.S. point of view, I don't think there was a bias among the State Department people I worked with. Where you saw the bias was among the think tanks and non-government groups, like AIPAC and others.

Q: Was there a sense of exasperation among policy-makers about the settlement process?

EICHER: I think there clearly was but I'm not sure it went beyond exasperation into effective action. Although we talked with the Israelis about ending settlements, I couldn't help thinking that the U.S. really needed to get tougher on Israel on this point in particular, which was clearly impeding the peace process and complicating a long-term settlement. On the other hand, you didn't necessarily get the sense of great Arab sincerity either. You never really got the feeling that if you got tough on Israel and finally got them to do "A" or "B" that the Arabs would accept it as a positive step and reciprocate. It was more a feeling that the Arabs would just pocket any Israeli concession and then make their next demand. That's why we were trying to get reciprocal confidence-building measures. But sometimes, often even, it seemed as if neither side was really in a sincere peacemaking mode themselves. So what we were doing was very much a holding operation, trying at least to make sure things didn't get worse and, to the extent possible to press for small steps forward.

You know, I learned a lot from the experience. First, as I've said, you can't be successful with a peace settlement if you want it more than the parties to the conflict do. We Americans were constantly in danger of that, in danger of over-reaching. We had to keep explicitly reminding ourselves that we seemed to want it more than they did and to be careful that our own hopes and desires didn't get too far out in front of reality, since that could set us up for a big failure which could really set back the process. Second, I saw how different the American mindset is from the Middle Eastern mindset, and the mindset in much of the rest of the world. Americans see a problem and our reaction is "well, let's solve it," and let's do so as quickly as possible. For much of the rest of the world there is not much expectation of "solving" problems. For them, the problem is often seen as a fact of life. In many cases the problem has been around for centuries and they think it will probably be around for centuries more. Maybe it will be solved some day and maybe not. The mindset isn't to "solve" a problem, but to manage it, or find a way to live with it, or maybe to make some improvements around the edges. That's not to say that problems can't be solved, but that we Americans often go in with expectations that are too high and that our first challenge is often convincing people that a solution is even theoretically possible.

Q: You mentioned the Arab world. I know I was in Saudi Arabia one time back in the 50s. The Saudis could've helped the Palestinians significantly but in many ways keeping the Palestinian cause going without finding a solution represented, as I think it does even today, a source of unity for a very disparate Arab world which gives them something to focus on. You solve that and then you're left with all the sorts of other squabbles.

EICHER: I think there's something to be said for that. Look at things like the refugee problem. There are still Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria 50 or 60 years after they left, despite the Arab oil wealth. These people could have been helped enough to get them out of camps and give them a decent life. I think there has clearly been a political purpose to be served by keeping them in refugee camps, and the result has been generations of increasingly radical, disaffected Palestinians.

Q: We're talking about 1990. Did you leave there before the Gulf War?

EICHER: Yes, I left the peace process/Egyptian affairs position immediately before the first Gulf War.

Q: Good timing. Where did you go?

EICHER: I got an Una Chapman Cox Fellowship, so I had a year off.

Q: Okay. Then you produced the book that we'll talk about.

EICHER: I produced a book, yes.

But first, since you mentioned the Gulf War, let me just divert to that for a moment and then we can talk about the Cox Fellowship next time.

Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait within a couple of weeks after I began my Cox Fellowship. I was going to do some historical research on early American diplomats and I had gotten myself a little office in Annapolia beautiful little office right downtown with a fireplace and balcony overlooking the Annapolis Harboand I started work. No sooner had I settled into this new life, than the invasion of Kuwait took place. So there were all of my friends in NEA, who I had been so close to and worked together with for years, suddenly involved in the most important, pressing issue of U.S. foreign policy. It was the big news, all you could read about all over the front pages. And there was Eicher, out in the boonies someplace, away from it all. And as much as I was pleased to be having a year off, I couldn't help feeling just a little sorry for myself and thinking that "darn, just as things get exciting I'm gone and everybody has forgotten about me."

But, of course, it didn't turn out that way. The telephone rang and it was NEA calling to ask, would I be available to leave tomorrow on a trip to the Middle East? This really picked up my spirits; I hadn't been forgotten after all. I told them, "why, yes, of course," as if I were always packing up on a day's notice to go to the Middle East, which, in fact, was not so different from what I had been doing for the past three years. My wife was less than delighted that I was suddenly heading for a war zone instead of whiling away the hours at my new office in Annapolis. But, I think she was less surprised than I was that the call came in.

It turned out that Assistant Secretary John Kelly was going on a mission and he wanted to take somebody with him who he knew and trusted. But, everybody in NEA was so busy with what was going on that it would have been disruptive to the Bureau to take one of the regular officers. So, it worked out wonderfully for me. I flew out with Kelly and a staff assistant to Europe, where we caught a private military jet to the Middle East. The main purpose of the trip was, first of all, to meet with the emir of Kuwait, who was now in exile in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, to ask him whether he wanted U.S. help in getting his country back. This was the first official meetinat least the first high level onwith the Emir since he was forced into exile. It was a very somber meeting, of course. There was a big group of Kuwaiti nobles there, all looking very grim and with tales of the outrages Saddam had committed. The Emir spoke marginal English and stayed for a while, then left the meeting to his brother, who was, I think, the foreign minister. In response to our main question, they very much wanted U.S. assistance to oust Saddam from Kuwait. Our second question to the Emir was whether he would be willing to pay for the cost of a war to oust Saddam, and he said he would. We got all this in writing from him. I think we even took out a draft letter setting out what he needed to say. So, in a way this was a very historic meeting; it set the stage for U.S. intervention and provided the groundwork for President Bush's (the first President Bush's) statement that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait "will not stand." Soon afterwards, the U.S. launched "Desert Shield," the military build-up to protect Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries and to prepare for taking Kuwait back.

I should say also, as an aside, that this was my first trip back to Dhahran, where I was born, since I had left there when I was about one year old. Unfortunately, we didn't have time to see the sightif there are any sights in Dhahrasince we were whisked from the airport to the fancy meeting hall where we met the Emir and then back again. But I did see the city from the air, from our little private jet, and did see a bit out the car windows as we drove along. It was not at all what I imagined. My parents always talked about Dhahran as a little oil camp in the desert, but here was a real, good-sized city. It had been about 40 years since I was born, so I guess there were a lot of changes.

The rest of the trip with Kelly was aimed at building an Arab coalition to stand with us against the invasion. This was a key element of the broader coalition against Saddam that would be put into place. Getting Arab support would be critical to the success of U.S. policy. Looking back now, there was such an enormous contrast from the careful effort we made then to get international support and participation for the effort to liberate Kuwait, and President Bush II's go-it-alone, "you're with us or you're against us" approach to the second Gulf War ten years later.

In Saudi Arabia, Kelly and I met with the foreign minister in Jeddah, who was also supportive. We then went on to Egypt and Syria, which also got on board. This was important stuff, and not to be taken for granted. Even though Saddam was not well liked by the Egyptians or Syrians, going to war against him was not an easy step; it was not at all a foregone conclusion that they would step in. We met a lot of very high level people. I can't remember if we also visited Jordan or not, but I do remember that we avoided Israel, because we didn't want to risk giving the Arabs a reason to say no, by making it look like they would be part of a coalition with Israel against another Arab country. So, it was a very interesting trip for ten days or so. I was right in the thick of it, in some of the most important meetings of the pre-war period. I was satisfied. Nobody had forgotten me and I had been in on the action, more so, in fact, than if I were still on the desk. After that trip, I went back to my sabbatical.

Q: On this trip that you made with Assistant Secretary Kelly, was it pretty well determined that we were going in or was this sort of preliminary?

EICHER: It was not yet fully decided. Nobody had met with the emir yet. I think the inclination was certainly to go in, given the nature of our mission. We were certainly prepared to go in if we got kind of responses we expected to get. Immediately after meeting the emir we started building the coalition. But, I'm not sure what the approach would have been if the emir had said no, or had put us off for some reason. Or, I'm not sure how we would have proceeded if all the Arabespecially the Saudis, but also the Egyptians and Syrianhad said no. We couldn't have done the Desert Shield build-up without Saudi support. So, while the direction of U.S. policy was pretty clear, the outcome was less certain.

After this very interesting experience with Kelly, I went back to my Cox Fellowship in my little office in Annapolis to continue my research. But my fellowship was interrupted once more by the Middle East. In a way, it was sort of a repeat of the experience I just described. The trip with Kelly was in August or September of 1990. That was followed by a long and slow military build-up in Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries. In January of 1991, I think it was, Desert Storm finally began. It started with an extended bombing campaign against Iraq, in preparation for the invasion of Kuwait. So, once again, the Middle East was all over the front pages and there I was still off in my nice little office in Annapolis, overlooking the harbor. And once again, as much as I was enjoying my research, I was thinking once again about all the great events going on in the world and that I was sidelined; everybody had forgotten Peter Eicher. Then the telephone rang again. It was, of course, the Department saying, "you know, there's a war on and we'd like you to come back and join us for a little while. We want you to be one of the coordinators of the task force for the Gulf War." I couldn't really say no to thain fact, if I'm honest, I'm not sure I even wanted to say nand I agreed to go back. I ended up spending about six weeks doing shift work in the Operations Center, heading various shifts of the task force.

Q: Was the war still ongoing when you came back to work on the task force?

EICHER: The war had just actually started. That is, you'll recall that during the first Gulf War, there was this long period of bombing Iraq that took place before the actual invasion. I don't remember exactly how long it went on, but that is what was going on when I went to the task force. You'll remember all those CNN shots from Baghdad of the bombs coming down. The bombing was the beginning of Desert Storm. That's when CNN really became a worldwide force for the first time. A lot of what we did in the Operations Center was watching CNN to figure out what was going on. We would get news more quickly from the TV than from our embassies. I think this was starting to mark a very significant change in what diplomatic reporting could be and should be, which I would write about in my book. It was no longer possible for diplomats to beat the news broadcasts. Diplomatic reporting would increasingly have to be about analysis and reporting on private meetings and contacts, and less on quick reporting of events. The war was a very short war, as you'll remember, but we did have the task force going for quite a while.

Q: One of the crucial things about this whole Gulf War seemed to have been, and I got this, obviously, from others who had served in regular positions, that there was no real plan on how to end the war. General Schwarzkopf essentially ended up making key decisions in a tent out in the middle of the desert. That's where I see it. Was there any talk in your group I mean, obviously you weren't in the policy group, but did there seem to be a policy on ending the war?

EICHER: We certainly talked about it and there was speculation but I don't think we knew any more than anybody else did. In fact, it was a surprisingly sleepy task force. Once the war started, the real activity was presumably over at the Pentagon and the White House rather than in the State Department. It was quiet even compared to some of the African coup task forces that I had served on. We did have action items, of course, and we had to be on top of developments and do regular situation reports and so forth, but we were not really in the middle of things. I was one of four coordinators, I think. Each of us had a team of about five or six, including a consular officer, an analyst, a military liaison and one or two others. We worked rotating eight hour shifts, that is, for two days we'd work 8:00 to 4:00, then two days 4:00 to midnight, then two days midnight to 8:00, then off for two or three days. It's pretty disruptive to your sleep patterns. On the positive side, the next shift always came in on time to relieve you; this may have been the only State Department job I ever had where I really worked only eight hours a day.

Q: In a way, the lack of a plan to end the war highlights the problem of calling the Pentagon the war-makers and the State Department the peacemakers. This is a tremendous oversimplification but at the same time, if you've got a war, you've got to have a peace.

EICHER: I think that's right. Certainly my view, and I think the view of the preponderance of the people I was working with, did not think it was a mistake to stop the war when we did. I mean, we had achieved our war goal, as it had been announced. Iraq had been removed from Kuwait. I don't recall anybody, certainly not myself, thinking that we should take advantage of this and move on to Baghdad and change the regime. Those kind of thoughts really moved to the fore later, when Saddam started being a problem again.

Q: I'm thinking even less of moving arms and doing that but to figure out what we wanted to see. Apparently, we left Saddam with enough tools to re-impose a brutal regime, particularly on dissident groups. We're living with the consequences now. I don't want to put words in your mouth but was there the feeling that, you know, after this defeat, Saddam is not going to last?

EICHER: I think that was probably everybody's general impression. He had lost face; he had lost the so-called "mother of all battles." His army had been pretty much destroyed, at least to the extent that it didn't pose a threat to any other country. There was a lot of devastation in Iraq as a result of the bombing. It seemed that sensible people would oust him and find somebody more reasonable. So I think the expectation was that he would be ousted or at least would he be back in his box where he couldn't cause any more trouble. But if there was any actual planning to that effect, I'm not aware of it. In fact, in terms of postwar planning in general, I never saw anything or heard talk of any plans at all, except with regard to Kuwait, where people were focusing on putting out oil well fires and things of that nature. In the task force, however, I was not in a position where I necessarily would have been seeing such plans, if they existed.

Q: Let's cover Cox grants. Could you explain the genesis of Cox grants, what it was and then what you were doing?

EICHER: Well, the Cox Foundation gives a grant every yeasome years two grantto a Foreign Service officer to pursue a project. I wasn't really very familiar with Cox grants when I applied for one. The story is that Una Chapman Cox, a wealthy oil heiress, sailed her yacht into India, at some point, and was promptly arrested and put in jail for not having the proper papers, illegal entry. She was so impressed with the work of the consular officer who got her released that she decided to leave part of her fortune to do good things for the Foreign Service. The result was the Cox Foundation, which has a number of programs to benefit the Service. Their premier grant, however, is the annual Cox Fellowship. It's supposed to be given to a deserving FSO (Foreign Service Officer) based on his or her having done a good job in the past.

As I said, I wasn't really familiar with the fellowship program at the time, but I saw a Department notice about it and it looked interesting. At that time, the Cox grant was accepted as one of the six bids everyone was required to submit for their onward assignment. The list of assignment possibilities that year was not very attractive to me and there were not six positions that I really wanted to bid on, so I put in for a Cox grant in order to fill up my bid list. As part of the bid I had to present a project proposal. I had always been interested in diplomatic history and so I put forth a proposal that if I were chosen, I would like to do some historical research and writing on early American diplomats. I spent two or three hours down in the State Department library doing a little background research to be able to give a number of examples of the kinds of things I would like to do. Then, I pretty much set it aside. It was not high on my bid list. What I was really hoping to do that year was to go to teach at the Naval Academy. There had traditionally been a State Department teaching slot at the Naval Academy and the other military academies. I lived in Crofton, Maryland, very close to Annapolis. It would have been convenient. My dad had just died and my mom was there and it would have been a chance to spend more time and help her out. I had been in very high powered jobs, high intensity jobs, for the past few years and hadn't seen much of the family. So the Naval Academy seemed to be a nice idea. Unfortunately, although the Naval Academy slot was on the bid list, they discontinued the position starting that year, so it really wasn't available, after all.

I was actually quite surprised when the Department came back and offered me the Cox Fellowship. I had to admit to the person who offered it to me that, you know, I wasn't very familiar with it and I was really hoping for something else. He told me, "Wait a minute. You don't want to turn this down. This is the Department's best sabbatical program. It's much better than your other bids. You need to look very carefully at this." He explained that they would give me a grant of twenty five or thirty thousand dollars, in addition to my salary, to pursue the project of my design and that funding could also be used for travel for myself and my spouse. So I looked into it a bit more and found that he was right, this was a great program. So I accepted the fellowship.

Q: Had you already designed a project?

EICHER: Only to the extent that I have described it to you. I had spent two or three hours in the library and decided it would be nice to do some historical research. I always enjoyed libraries and history, especially diplomatic history and doing research. My very brief project proposal said I would research and write about early American diplomats. There was no requirement to produce a book and I didn't necessarily want to be tied down to that, so I said I'd do articles, thinking that these might become a book, or maybe not. As I said, I had no idea there would be this huge grant or that you'd be able to travel or use it for other things. As it turned out, however, with the Gulf War starting soon after I got my grant, the State Department was issuing advisories not to travel almost any place, literally, so I wasn't really able to take advantage of the travel possibilities that some Cox grantees have had. So, I rented a little office in Annapolis and got myself a computemy very first computer, a MAC, and I had to learn how to use it; I didn't even know how to use a mouse! In those days the State Department was still using WANG word processors. My kids had to teach me to use a computer. I was able to make an arrangement with the Naval Academy to use their library, which was very good and convenient for my purposenaval history overlaps tremendously with diplomatic history. I also got one of the little cubicles in the State Department Library assigned to me and I started spending time in the Library of Congress and at the National Archives. As my first project, I researched and wrote a story on William Palfry, who had always intrigued me because he is the first person on "the plaque."

Q: You might mention what the plaque is.

EICHER: The plaque is the big black, marble plaque you can see as you walk into the main lobby of the State Department. There are two now: the one on the left as you walk in is inscribed to people who have died in tragic or heroic circumstances in the line of duty. Once that plaque filled up, they started another plaque on the opposite side of the lobby. I believe that now pretty much anyone who dies in the line of duty has their name put on the plaque, including even some people who are not State Department. The new plaque gives only the name and the year of death, but the old plaque also includes a few words about how each person died, "yellow fever," or "earthquake," or "drowned saving life." The old plaque is little erratic and doesn't really include everyone it should. The first entry on the plaque is "William Palfry, Lost at Sea, 1780." He was to be the first consul in Paris, in fact, the first U.S. consul anywhere. He was on his way to join Ben Franklin but his ship disappeared en route, with no survivors.

As I was doing the research on Palfrey and started on the next one, I kept coming across these wonderful, historic, early dispatches from American diplomats, describing events at their posts. It occurred to me that we have had people assigned in other countries of the world for the last 200 plus years, all writing home to the State Department about all the politically interesting events of world history. This is a marvelous collection buried away in dusty archives. Why not try to uncover some of it? In fact, I decided, it might be a lot more fun to put together a collection of those. So, I got in touch with the Cox people and asked them if it would be all right if I changed my project and they said fine, fine. They were extremely relaxed about it. The Cox philosophy, in fact, was that the grant was supposed to be reward for a Foreign Service officer who was doing good work rather than a requirement to produce anything. It was the State Department, which was still paying your salary, that insisted you produce something useful as part of your fellowship, although State was also pretty relaxed and didn't seem to care much exactly what you produced. There was, for example, no requirement to publish anything. In any case, neither Cox nor State objected to my idea, so I changed my project and began to put together a collection of dispatches.

The time I had available was pretty constrained since a couple months had gone by before I shifted projects and since was I called back to active duty twice, for the Gulf War, during the course of the sabbatical. Still, I managed to put together a pretty good collection that I thought might be publishable and I left it with ADST (the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training) to see if they might want to do something with it. They had an agent at that time who looked at it and decided it was not really a publishable work. It was two or three hundred dispatches, each with a short introduction putting it into historical context. The manuscript was probably a thousand typewritten pages or so. I left a copy with ADST and I kept a copy and figured I would do some more work on it later and eventually I might turn it into something that could be published.

Ultimately, just to complete the story, several years later a new president of ADST, Steve Lowho I had worked for when he was Ambassador to Nigerifound my manuscript on the shelf of his office and liked it very much. ADST was about to start its own publishing program and had hired its own publishing adviser. They asked me if I wanted to do some more work to make it publishable and I agreed. I spent quite a long time adding to it and refining it and including a little more historical background. It finally came out as a book in 1997, I believe.

Q: And the title of the book?

EICHER: Emperor Dead and Other Historic American Diplomatic Dispatches.

Q: Can you explain the origin of the title?

EICHER: "Emperor Dead" is the entire text of the dispatch sent in by our envoy in St. Petersburg when Czar Alexander II was assassinated. Just two words. It was a time when telegrams were just starting to be used and our diplomats were instructed to use extreme brevity in telegrams because they were so expensive and they were charged by the word. So, our envoy sent just a two word dispatch to describe a momentous event, and followed this up with a formal, hand written dispatch which contained much more information.

Q: How did you go about finding these dispatches? The archives must be loaded with them.

EICHER: They are loaded with them. Fortunately, most of the State Department dispatches have been put on microfilm and organized by post and chronologically within posts, which makes it easier, much easier, to locate things. On the other hand, there are enormous numbers of dispatches and the microfilms aren't all of terribly good quality. And, until about 1900, all dispatches were hand written; typewriters were not used until the twentieth century. Some diplomats had beautiful handwriting, but many did not. The microfilms are basically transparencies of the hand written originals and slogging through them is difficult and time consuming.

I tried to do a variety of things that I thought would make for an interesting and worthwhile collection. In the first place, I wanted to include interesting and historically significant events. So, I started with the very first American diplomatic dispatch ever sent, which was from Silas Deane in Paris. Then I moved on to the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars and later events. I went looking for some specific eventthe execution of Louis XVI, Waterloo and the Louisiana purchase, for exampland stumbled on others like the recruiting of the Marquis de Lafayette, or reports of pirate depredations in various places. I made myself a long list of interesting historical events to check out. Many of them did have interesting reports, but many did not. For example, I went looking to see if we had anybody in Indonesia when Krakatau erupted and sure enough, we had a consul in Batavia who gave a fascinating description the disaster. I found reports on the discovery of the source of the Nile, the Indian Mutiny, the Alaska gold rush, the Armenian genocide, the rise of Hitler, you know, as many interesting things as I could think of. I tried hard to get geographic balance, so I included the first dispatch from China and some reports of the Latin American wars of independence. In trying to get balance, I also read randomly the dispatches from some countries that were not otherwise included, which allowed me to stumble on some of the nicest dispatches that I found. For example, I didn't have anything from Siam or Korea so I started reading through those and found a wonderful description of the royal elephant hunt in Siam and of grave-robbing in Korea. There were lots of fun, quirky reports, like supposedly finding the arms of the Venus de Milo, and of an early consul in Texas having his horses stolen by Indians.

So, I went through history and read thousands of dispatches, and selected what I thought were the most interesting or historically significant. I made kind of an arbitrary stop in the early 1960s because the collection was getting very long and my time was running out, and also because of the number of dispatches each year was multiplying beyond all control and mainly because the declassification process had only gone up to the early '60s at that stage.

In addition to events, I tried to include dispatches written by famous people who have served as American diplomats. Quite a few of our early presidents served as diplomats, so I wanted to include at least one dispatch from each of them. A lot of well-known authors also served as diplomats: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, James Russell Lowell, so I got at least one from each of those who I could find. I also included other personalities that are a bit less well known but still significant: Mirabeau Lamar, who was one of the presidents of Texas when it was independent, and Thomas Nast, who was America's leading political cartoonist, who originated the elephant and donkey symbols for the Republicans and Democrats. Often the dispatches from well-known people were not particularly noteworthy, but occasionally I hit the jackpot, for example with Thomas Jefferson's description of the storming of the Bastille and John Quincy Adams's report on Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

Q: Just out of curiosity, where was your office in Annapolis?

EICHER: It was right at the city dock, the well-known Market Square. If you go to Market Square and look at the buildings, there is only one building that has a small balcony; it's on the first floor above ground level, and that was the balcony of my office.

Q: I lived in Annapolis as a teenager so I used to go down to the market place there and I knew that area very well.

EICHER: Well, it was wonderful. There was also a little fireplace in the office, which gave it a nice feeling, although I never lit a fire. It was just a one-room office. Nonetheless, it was very nice.

I had first thought, as I told you, that I was going to be writing about early American diplomats. Originally, I had visions of traveling to the places where the diplomats served, for example, maybe to Greece, as part of my research into somebody who served in Crete, to pick up some local color and history and so forth. As it turned out, I got only as far my second story of a particular diplomat, a fellow named Daniel Clark who was our consul in New Orleans before it became American. I took just one little trip to New Orleans, which, as I said, was permitted, and under the Cox rules I was allowed to take my wife along as well, so we a very nice long weekend in New Orleans, which I had never visited before. We managed to find Daniel Clark's grave in an old cemetery there and I found that the historical society there had a couple of papers of Daniel Clark's that had not been available in Washington. I had really hoped to be doing more of that kind of traveling, but as things developed, it didn't work out.

I should also mention that I had a couple of research assistants who helped me out in gathering information for part of the sabbatical. I advertised both at the Naval Academy and at St. John's University and hired a couple of students part-time, one of whom didn't produce very much or last long, but another one who was quite good and helpful. I would task him to go to the archives and look through Egypt or Brazil or whatever, and see what he could find, or to try to find some specific historic events. So this was helpful and enabled me to cover more than I could have done by myself.

Q: Then, getting back to the real world, by the way, right now the book is out of print, but we're hoping you can work it somehow so that we can have it printed again.

EICHER: Well, I hope so, that would be very nice. Marjorie Thompson is working on this, so we'll see.

Q: You finished this when?

EICHER: I finished the sabbatical in June of 1991.

Q: So then what?

EICHER: Then I moved on to what had been my dream job over very many years. I became political counselor in Geneva. That was the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in Geneva. You may recall I had previously served a tour in the Department's office of United Nations political affairs, so I had some experience on the UN.

Q: You did that from when to when?

EICHER: I was in Geneva from 1991 to 1995.

Q: All right. Could you explain what the job consisted of and then we'll talk about what happened while you were there.

EICHER: The job was quite diverse and interesting. Geneva is the headquarters of many United Nations agencies and other international organizations. The political counselor's title was actually "Counselor for Political and Specialized Agency Affairs." I had a variety of different organizations and issues to deal with. The main issue by far was human rights. The UN Human Rights Commission was based in Geneva, which was a highly political and very active body. There were also several UN human rights treaty bodies based there and what was then the UN Center for Human Rights, which later became the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. But my section was also responsible for the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the International Telecommunication Union and the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as helping out generally on any political negotiations which might be going on in Geneva. There were always some kind of international political talks going on in Geneva. While I was there, the principal one was the Yugoslavia peace negotiations, which started while I was in Geneva.

Q: Who was your ambassador or did you have several?

EICHER: I had two and they were both political appointees. The first was Morris Abrams, who was a very distinguished, quite well-known, elderly lawyer. He used to tell stories that he had been one of the young attorneys at the Nuremberg trials. He had also been a civil rights lawyer in the United States and was one of the people who helped break up the Ku Klux Klan. He was, therefore, well-known and well regarded. We changed administrations while I was in Geneva. Abrams, I think, had been a Democrat for Reagan, and he had been appointed to Geneva by Bush (that's the first President Bush). He was replaced by Dan Spiegel when the Clinton administration came in. Spiegel was another attorney who was active in politics and had been one of the top people in Clinton's transition team at State. Spiegel told us he had been heavily involved in the creation of the "G" position (Under Secretary for Global Affairs) because he believed that functional issues like human rights and environment and refugees were not getting enough attention at State. His interest in those issues is what made him interested in the Geneva assignment.

Q: I would imagine arriving there in 1991, which is really only two years after the breakup of the Soviet Union... in fact, the Soviet Union hadn't even broken up at that point. But I mean, obviously, such a cataclysmic event in Europe must've had a big impact in Geneva. You must've felt that you were sort of in the center of re-creating Europe.

EICHER: We did. It was a very exciting time for the United Nations in many fields. Among other things, it helped transform the Human Rights Commission, which I was dealing with, which had been kind of a backwater. The Human Rights Commission was extremely political and had been extremely unpopular. It had not been able to do much during the Cold War because one side or the other would always block everything. The West didn't like it because it didn't seem to do much and the East and Third World didn't like it because they were always potential targets of the Commission because of their bad human rights records. I got to Geneva just as things were beginning to change. In August 1991, just after I arrived, was the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev by Marxist hardliners, which led to Yeltsin's rise to power and the end of the Soviet Union. I remember being in a big UN meeting when the word of the coup attempt started to filter through, and speaking with my Russian colleaguewho I had only just met but would later get to be friends witand how worried they were about developments at home.

As it turned out, the Russians became our friends, as did all the Eastern Europeans. Suddenly, the Cold War dynamics that had paralyzed the United Nations fell away. It suddenly seemed possible, for the first time, to forge a coalition of Western, Eastern, and other democracies within the Human Rights Commission that could make the organization effective and start making human rights a bigger and more integral part of the UN. That became our goal over the next several years, and I think we did it quite successfully.

We never really got explicit instructions from Washington about this, but we did find strong support for almost all our ideas so we charged ahead. There was no question back theunder George H. W. Bush and Clintothat United States policy was to support international human rights. We had pretty much free reign to develop whatever ideas we could to highlight and advance human rights. I loved working on those issues, because it seemed that it could really affect people's lives for the better and make the world a better place. I mean, we knew that things were not going to change immediately on the ground in far-off countries because of what we were doing in Geneva, but we were setting international rules and making judgments that would make a difference over time and, in some cases, could even lead to immediate changes. You could feel good working with human rights because you almost always had the moral high ground. There was a much clearer sense of right and wrong than you usually get on foreign policy issues and the United States was overwhelmingly on the "right" side back then. I get both angry and sad when I see how much that has changed under the current Bush administration. It's just so hard to believe that the United States is on the wrong side of so many human rights issues and that senior American officials are even advocating torture. It really makes me cringe and makes me happy I'm no longer associated with U.S. positions on human rights.

In any event, in the Human Rights Commissiowhich was a big part of our effort to advance human rights in the UN systewe were able to put together a new, often shifting coalition for progress on human rights issues. In addition to the Western countries and our new Eastern friends, we were able to bring most of the Latin American democracies on board and, occasionally, a few of the Africans and Asians. For the first time, the Commission actually started passing resolutions and taking action on difficult issues. Previously, the only time that the United Nations had spoken out against human rights violations in particular countries tended to be a very few instances in Central America countries where the United States was willing to join the Soviets in condemning a particular Latin American dictatorship. Now, we found, we were able to get resolutions against African and Asian human rights violators for the first time. We were also able to develop new mechanisms to highlight human rights problems and recommend solutions. It wasn't all so simple or straightforward, but often we felt like we were on a roll.

Q: You said that the commission had been very unpopular. Was that because it was sort of lousing up relations among different countries or creating other problems, or was it just that it was unpopular with people who were abusing human rights?

EICHER: It was mainly unpopular with the abusers, of course. It was not a very well known organization worldwide and certainly not in the United States. Interestingly, the abusers tended to know and care much more about the Commission than the "good guys," if you will, because the abusers were afraid that they would get condemned. As a result, a lot of the abusers would work to get themselves elected to the Commission and this would sometimes lead to them being able to block progress. This, in turn, would make the Commission an easy target for critics of the UN, including in the United States. It was easy for the usual UN-bashers to say "look, you've got Cuba and China and Syria and Libya on the Human Rights Commission; that proves it's a joke." I thought that kind of argument was misguided. It just meant that the Commission was reflective of the UN members. It was still possible to beat those guys if you took a constructive approach and worked at it. We won much more than we lost at the Commission. I was deeply disappointed, therefore, that the U.S. helped lead the charge to do away with the Commission a couple of years ago and replace it with the new UN Human Rights Council. I thought that was very short-sighted and that we lost one of the most important international tools we had against human rights violators. It was another little-noticed instance of the Bush II administration undercutting long-standing U.S. policy on human rights.

One of the things that convinced me how important the Commission was and how useful and influential its words and actions really could be, was seeing how worried the "bad guys," or abusers, were that the Commission might say something about them. The abusers really, really didn't want to have the United Nations single them out. They considered it a huge stigma. A number of them would even take some positive steps on human rights to try to get out from under, so that in itself was positive. If you saw the effort that China, for example, would make every year to avoid being considered by the Human Rights Commission, it was just enormous. They would send delegations to every member of the Commission and increase aid programs to those countries. We used to joke that the China resolution in the Commission was the greatest thing for international sports, because the Chinese, in trying to line up votes, would visit many of the little African members of the Commission and offer to build stadiums in their countries. The Chinese head of state would get personally involved in appealing to different countries to support China in the Human Rights Commission. It was really important to them, and that gave us some significant leverage on human rights. The same was true for most other abusers.

Q: Yes. The bottom line is what they're doing, I mean, not the PR spin but what were they doing vis-ï¿½-vis human rights.

EICHER: Yes, of course, that was our position. When anybody is seriously violating human rights, they should be called to account. In general, the UN is not going to send in troops to deal with a human rights problem but a UN condemnation is a very significant, important stigma. For the United Nations to tell a country, "you're a human rights violator," to put them on the short list of countries condemned by name, is something countries just don't want to have happen to them.

And, in fact, as we pressed human rights issues more vigorously and they became increasing integral to broader UN issues, the UN actually did start sending in troopin a few caseto deal with human rights crises. The first, I think, was Haiti. But also, belatedly, in Rwanda and other countries. Widespread human rights violations came to be regarded as a threat to international peace and security and became a standard issue for peace-keeping operations.

Q.: Well, let's take China and then move on to other countries. During the time that you were there, was the Commission drawing attention to China or was China doing anything about the human rights situation?

EICHER: Well, China was the biggie. It was certainly the largest, most difficult, most time-consuming issue we dealt with. Every year the question that arose was whether there would be a resolution presented in the Human Rights Commission to criticize China's human rights policies. China's human rights situation was extremely grim in very many ways. These were the years not long after the Tiananmen massacre and there was still lots of "reeducation" going on, sentences of administrative detention, political prisoners, labor unions being suppressed, persecution of religious activities, the one-child policy being ruthlessly enforced. There were almost no civil and political rights in China. And, of course, there was Tibet, which was a huge problem in itself and a big aspect of U.S.-China policy within the Commission. I don't think anybody would deny that there was a serious human rights problem in China and that it was one of the world's big violators.

Q: Did you get the feeling in regard to China that there were those within the State Department and the body politic in the United States who were saying, you're lousing up things here. We've got trade deals, you know, in other words, were you the burr under the saddle or something of that nature?

EICHER: Absolutely. There was no question about it. There was a very tough fight in the U.S. bureaucracy every year about whether to sponsor a China resolution. I got into that fight from the Washington end in my subsequent assignments. There were a lot of Americans who put other issues ahead of human rights and thought we should not sponsor a resolution. This included lots of official Americans, senior State Department people. In particular, our main opponent was always the China desk, which never liked the idea of a resolution at all and which was a powerful opponent. I used to get irked that much of the State Department, at the instigation of the China desk, even took up the Chinese nomenclature of calling it the "anti-China resolution." We had to continually remind everyone that it was not an anti-China resolution, and it was not anti-Chinese per se; it was a resolution on the situation on human rights in China, and no one could really deny that there was a problem there.

From our human rights perspective, we seldom thought that there was a real chance to win a China vote because they were so big and had so much influence with many of the little members of the Commission. They not only sort of bribed countries to vote with them in exchange for aid packages, but they also engaged in a practice of taking reprisals against countries that voted against them in the Commission, by suspending trade deals, and so forth. It was serious stuff. But, sponsoring a China resolution was critical for our credibility with almost any of the other actions we were pushing on human rights. Things were so bad in China and it so dominated the international human rights scene, that for us to ignore it would just feed into the argument being used against us that we were selective and political. How could we press for action on say, Sudan or Burma or Iraq, if we were silent on China? Are human rights just to be imposed by the big guys on the little guys? Why don't you pick on somebody your own size? Are things really worse in Cuba than in China? And so forth. So, for us in Geneva, backing a China resolution was extremely important. If we were going to get anything else done in the Commission, we needed to take on China. It didn't really matter so much if we won or lost the China vote, what we really needed was to show that we were willing to make the effort, that we didn't have a double standard.

So the battle in Washington over the China resolution was critical to us in Geneva and we inevitably got involved. Sometimes it was high drama. I remember that at my first Human Rights Commission the Europeans put forward a resolution on human rights in Tibet. This almost turned into a disaster. Washington instructed us to vote against the resolution because they thought that it could be read to suggest we supported an independent Tibet. The Chinese were gleefuactually chortlinat the prospect that the U.S. was going to vote with them and against the Europeans about human rights in Tibet, as if everything there were just fine! We couldn't believe it and went back with reclama after reclama about the damage it would do to our human rights policy. This went on until the night before the vote, when we finally got agreement from Washington that we could vote for the resolution if the Europeans would change the title to the "the situation of human rights in Tibet/China." They reluctantly made the change and we voted in favor, but the resolution was soundly defeated since we had spent so much time on internal bickering that there was no time left to build support among other countries.

After that, we did sponsor a resolution on China every year that I was working on the issue, both while I was in Geneva and later, while I worked on human rights in the Department, but there was always an internal battle. The final decision to sponsor often came so late that we couldn't run an effective campaign, so the resolutions usually went down in flames. Still, as I said, just sponsoring was the key issue for us, not whether we won or lost.

There was one more year of very high drama on the China resolution; I can't remember which year it was, I think it was probably 1993 or 1994, possibly '95. Whatever year it was, we had actually made a decision reasonably far in advance. We had lobbied hard in capitals and in Geneva. The Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, John Shattuck, came out for the vote, together with a senior adviser from the National Security Council. We were all trying to count votes and it was very close. It was a real showdown. The usual Chinese procedure in the Commission was that when the resolution on China came up, they would make a parliamentary maneuver, introducing a motion to take no action on the resolution. There would be a vote on the "no action motion" and every year the Chinese won, so there was never even a vote taken on the actual resolution. Anyway, this particular year it was very close and we had convinced enough countries to vote against the Chinese procedural motion that we had a real chance of defeating it, and even getting the resolution adopted for the first time. The way the Commission's schedule worked out, the China vote came very late in the evening, about 11:00. There was a roll-call vote on the Chinese motion to take no action and it was defeated, for the first time ever, by just one or two votes. Everyone was startled, amazed that we had finally beat the Chinese. Even the Chinese were amazed; they had counted their votes wrong; they had been sure they would win. At that point, however, the chairman suspended the session until the next morning, when the actual vote would take place. We spent much of the night trying to make contact with some of the capitals of Commission members. I think Benin and Ethiopia might have been the key swing votes. We were trying to get to them directly and through the Department, to convey the word that we need you to stand by us on the actual vote. No doubt the Chinese were also making midnight demarches around the world. The next morning there was another roll call vote on the actual resolution. Everyone was biting their fingernails. When the count came in, we lost by one or two votes. I think it was the Russians and Ethiopians that changed their votes and voted against our resolution even though they had voted with us to defeat the procedural motion. So, it was high drama. The big news, however, was we had defeated the no-action motion; the Commission had finally, formally considered the situation of human rights in China for the first time, even though the resolution had been narrowly defeated. It was a symbolic victory. The Chinese took it very seriously. They replaced their ambassador and in following years they redoubled their efforts. It was one of the few times our actions in the Commission actually made the front page of the New York Times.

There were a few other times we also made the front page of the Times. One was when we passed the first resolution of the UN ever condemning anti-Semitism. That was seen as a real step forward for the UN and involved another complicated drama. Remember that not long before, the UN had been equating Zionism with racism, so the anti-Semitism resolution was seen as a big victory, even though it was quite a convoluted resolution.

We also created the position of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, which was probably one of the greatest human rights achievements of my time in Geneva. This wasn't actually done in the Commission, but through a different mechanism I worked on a lot, the World Conference on Human Rights. The creation of the High Commissioner was a real breakthrough. Symbolically, it elevated human rights to a much higher status in the UN, and in practical terms it eventually meant that a lot more resources were devoted to human rights and that human rights became better integrated into all UN activities. Although it didn't get off to a great start, it did create an institution that has been able to do some real good.

Q: What was the problem in getting it started?

EICHER: The problem was the selection, basically. There was not enough preparation on the part of the United States or the Europeans in terms of coming up with a good candidate who could really make the most of the new office. An Ecuadorian diplomat, Josï¿½ Ayala-Lasso, was named as the first High Commissioner for Human Rights. Ayala-Lasso was not a human rights expert or crusader. He was quite a gray, non-confrontational kind of diplomat. He had chaired the UN General Assembly subcommittee that drafted the resolution creating the office, so he had a leg up in being associated with the new institution. As a diplomat seeking consensus, he was the kind of person the human rights violators could be more comfortable with, even though his heart was basically in the right place on human rights issues. So, he was not ready to make waves or to try to make the most out of the office, but he did do some useful things to get the office established and get its work started. He actually launched its first field mission, with a lot of U.S. help and encouragement, which set a very good precedent for future activities. And he avoided getting into any trouble, so perhaps that was also helpful in getting the office established and accepted. So, it was a modest start. A stronger personality could have made more of the office and the powers we gave it, I think. Later, when Ayala-Lasso was replaced by Mary Robinson, you got more of the fire-breathing, human rights-backing kind of leadership that I had envisioned for the position, but I was gone by that time. I understand that Robinson's style created its own kind of problems, not surprisingly, I guess, and that she was not necessarily a particularly good administrator and was a little bit of a loose cannon. But it was good to see a UN official speaking out forcefully on human rights issues.

Q: How did information come in about abuses and that sort of thing?

EICHER: We relied a great deal on nongovernmental organizations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and dozens of smaller organizations that focused on different countries. The UN also had its own human rights mechanisms that brought in information, including the human rights treaty bodies and the special rapporteurs on particular countries or issues. One of the most important things we did, in fact was to greatly expand and strengthen the system of UN special rapporteurs, who were investigating and reporting on human rights violations around the world. There was also a UN subcommission on human rights that developed information, and various working groups, for example on indigenous people, or on "disappearances." There were other mechanisms, including ones that allowed individuals to complain to the UN about human rights violations. There was even a "confidential" procedure, the so-called "1503 procedure," under which people or groups could bring violations to the attention of the UN; I was the Western member of that group one year. And then, of course, the U.S. was also doing its own human rights reports and we had very good, first hand information from our own embassies about abuses in various countries. So, there was no lack of information coming in. If anything, there was a risk of being overwhelmed by the amount of information coming in. Even in a big mission like ours, there was no way you could get through it all.

Q: Congress mandated these human rights reports, which have gotten honed more and more over the years. There are screams and yells about them within the Foreign Service. I know in the '70s I was in South Korea and we were not too happy with them but anyway, they have become quite a force in international relations. Were other countries doing the same thing?

EICHER: Not really, no. Interestingly, China would produce a report on human rights in the U.S. every year, claiming that, you know, China is not the only country with human rights violations, which was true enough, of course. A lot of countries complained that we reported on human rights violations around the world but that we didn't report on ourselves. But I'm not aware of any other country that was writing country reports on human rights as a matter of course, certainly not in the solid manner that the U.S. was doing it.

Q: In Geneva was there a human rights alliance with, say, with the British, the French or the Scandinavians or something? I mean, were we really leading the charge or were we one of a number?

EICHER: We were out in front on a number of issues, but there really was a good bunch of reliable countries in Geneva. There was a group in the UN in Geneva that was very strong and well coordinated on human rights issues, which was called the WEOG (the Western European and Others Group). The UN is formally broken down into five geographical groups, in particular for selecting which countries will be members of different UN bodies, which are required to have balanced geographical distribution. The WEOG includes Western Europeans and others, including the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The WEOG, however, coordinated closely on issues well beyond who would be elected to which UN body. The WEOG would meet regularly during the six weeks of the Human Rights Commission, every morning without fail, to coordinate policies and resolutions and who was going to take the lead on what and generally to plan on what we were trying to achieve and how we would achieve it. It was a very effective group which drove most of the work of the Commission. Most of the Commission's resolutions originated in the WEOG.

Q: Was WEOG pretty much of one mind?

EICHER: No, there were differences from time to time depending on the issues. At that time, the European Union didn't exist yet as it does today. It was before the Maastricht Treaty. They had what they called "the common foreign and security policy," which often was not a common policy at all. Sometimes you would get splits within the European countries on different issues, which occasionally worked to our advantage, but most often did not. In general, when the Western group was split, it just made us all weaker. The Europeans were generally pretty solid on human rights and we could normally count on them to do the right thing. Occasionally, they would want to take a weaker position on Iran or something than we would.

Q: What about the Helsinki Accords? The OSCE, the Organization for Security and Corporation in Europe? In many ways the Helsinki Accords were considered to be almost the key to the breakup of the Soviet Union and human rights were sort of at the core of that. How did the OSCE work in those days?

EICHER: It was just starting up in those days. In fact, I had virtually nothing to do with it at the time. Later in my life, I spent almost a decade with the OSCE, but at that point they were really just starting out. The Helsinki Accords dated from about 1976, I think it was. They grew out of the CSCE, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Only after the fall of communism was there enough constant activity going on, constructive activity going on, that they decided that the CSCE should become an organization, the OSCE, not just a Conference, the CSCE. They didn't set up a full-time secretariat and become the OSCE until about 1993 or 1994. The secretariat was in Vienna, rather than in Geneva, so it wasn't really in my bailiwick, and in any event it didn't get going in a big way until later. The Yugoslavia settlement was what really brought the OSCE to the fore as an active organization.

Q: Going back, still sticking on the human rights side, going back to China, was there any discernible movement on the part of the Chinese to cut out some of the human rights violations or was it more trying to keep people from criticizing them?

EICHER: That's an interesting issue. Every year as the Commission approached the Chinese would give signals that they would be ready to do a certain number of things if there was no China resolution. This would lead to discussions with them, sometimes by the United States. In fact, I got involved in some of these discussions myself, in a later job, when I went back to work on human rights in Washington. They would signal that okay, they were ready to release prisoner X, or maybe consider doing one or two of the other things we wanted them to do, like sign a new human rights treaty, or ratify one of the major human rights treaties, or move toward some other reform. They were never willing to make an explicit quid pro quo that they would do something in return for dropping the resolution, but the timing always seemed to be centered around the resolution and it was perfectly clear that that's what they were aiming at. Even with no agreement from us, they would almost always do something as resolution time approached, usually release a few prominent prisoners in the weeks or days before the Commission met, or sometimes take some other kind of action. Even if it wasn't enough to stop us from sponsoring a resolution, it would help them get other countries on their side. So it was interesting to watch them. It made us feel like we were doing something right, something that forced the Chinese to take positive steps. Still, it never seemed like they would do enough or that they were sincere about it; they just wanted to do the minimum needed to avoid a resolution. You know, we used to use the term that they would "let a couple of prisoners fall off the back of the truck." Well, that was nice. It was very positive to actually get people released. It certainly made a difference in those people's lives, as well as making a political point. But, in general these were people who never should have been arrested in the first place and, meanwhile, they would be rounding up half a dozen more dissidents. So, while it was always nice to get people released, and you got a sense of accomplishment from doing it, I became a bit wary of the political prisoners game with the Chinese. They were masters at manipulatiopicking up someone who never should have been picked up and then getting credit, or even concessions, for releasing them.

Q: What about Burma?

EICHER: Burma was always a big issue. We did certainly have Burma resolutions and there seemed to be a quite solid international support for condemning Burma's actions. There was a lot of support for trying to get Aung San Suu Kyi released. But Burma was one of those pariah regimes that didn't seem very concerned about international opinion. Most states, like the Chinese, would bend over backwards to avoid UN condemnation. A few, like Burma, were beyond the pale; they just didn't seem to care.

Speaking of Burma makes me think of one of the biggest events of my tenure, which I haven't really spoken about yet, the World Conference on Human Rights. This was a big UN world conference that was actually held in Vienna in 1993, but all the preparations for the conference were done in Geneva, because that's where all the international human rights officers were based. So we worked very hard on that. There were lots of preparatory meetings that went on for weeks and involved some very difficult negotiations. Difficult, but fun. I enjoyed multilateral negotiations. You would sit around a table with Iranians and Cubans and others who we don't usually talk with, and try to hammer out agreements. Or, you would sit with like-minded countries and look for ways to circumvent the "bad guys." Lots of the most important work was done informally in the coffee lounges, rounding up support and cutting deals, not in the plenary sessions, which usually consisted of boring speeches. There was a lot of parliamentary maneuvering, which I got pretty good at. After a while you could get a good sense of what could be adopted and what would face problems, even before consulting anyone else. You could tell what kind of amendments to propose that could win majority support and that might change something really bad into something OK.

Anyway, I'm digressing. The World Conference, when we finally finished all the preparatory meetings and got to Vienna, produced a declaration that actually included a number of very good things. It was far from a perfect declaration because we were laboring under the constraint that everyone wanted it to be adopted by consensus. In a way, this is a big advantage, because if it's adopted by consensus it really reflects world opinion and no one can later say it doesn't apply to them, since they voluntarily signed on. On the other hand, consensus required very hard negotiations and meant that we couldn't get everything we wanted. Still, there was a lot of good stuff in the declaration and we even had a couple of breakthroughs. We were able to get agreement, worldwide acceptance, for the first time, that human rights is not a just a domestic issue but it is a legitimate concern of the international community. With that, we really should have put the last nail in the coffin of those who claimed that what they do domestically is none of anyone's business and that criticism on human rights issues is interference in internal affairs. The declaration that came out of the World Conference made clear that human rights violations anywhere are everyone's business. So that was a major, hard-fought, victory.

The other really big accomplishment of the World Conference was laying the basis for the creation of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. With much difficulty, we got a paragraph in the declaration saying that the United Nations General Assembly should consider, as a matter of priority, creating a High Commissioner. This was the result of a lot of really hard work. NGO's had begun floating the idea of a High Commissioner for Human Rights about the time the conference preparations began. I liked the idea, as did others at the U.S. mission in Geneva. We thought it could really make a difference in UN priorities and lead to good things around the world. Washington was much less enthusiastic. Under the Bush administration, they were worried about the "dreaded UN bureaucracy" and they didn't really want to create new UN structures, even on issues that they basically supported, like human rights. We continued to advocate for it from Geneva and won some allies. Part of the problem was that no one really had a clear concept of what a High Commissioner would be or do, or what his or her powers would be. I actually sat down at one point and sketched out in a cable exactly what I thought the concept of High Commissioner should look like and how it should fit into the UN system and sent it to the Department in a cable. That was just about the time that the Clinton administration came into office. They seemed to like it, and it eventually became U.S. policy. After the World Conference, I went to New York in the fall of 1993 and joined the U.S. delegation in to the UN General Assembly, where we actually created the High Commissioner in quite difficult negotiations.

Q: Why were they difficult negotiations?

EICHER: Well, several reasons. I think there was reluctance among much of the Third Worland particularly among the big human rights violatorto create this new position that could end up highlighting some of the problems in their countries. I think that some of the countries that went along at the World Conference with the idea that the UN General Assembly would consider creating a High Commissioner felt that they could kill the idea in New York, or just let it die a quiet death in the General Assembly. These kinds of things usually are adopted by consensus and they felt that by withholding consensus, they could block it or stall it. Even among the countries supporting the idea, there was a lot of controversy over what the new position ought to be and what it ought to look like; not every country accepted all the ideas I had gotten the U.S. to buy on to.

The negotiations in New York went very slowly, very badly, and we could see that time was running out on the General Assembly session's consideration of human rights. It was clear that we had large majority in favor, but there were a lot of countries that were not enthusiastic and that were willing to let the clock run out. At the same time, we judged that if it came to a vote instead of relying on consensus, there were probably no more than half a dozen countrieif that manthat would actually be willing to stand up publicly and vote against a High Commissioner. Nobody wanted to look like they were blocking a High Commissioner, so that was an advantage for us. The dilemma was that most people, even our closest allies, wanted a consensus, not a vote, and that a few statel think Cuba, Syria, and for some reason Malaysia, and a couple otherwere deliberately trying to drag things out so there would be no consensus by the end of the session. We got into a squabble with our European allies, who generally wanted consensus, even if it meant waiting until the next year or longer. There was even a sharp division within the U.S. delegation about what we should do under these circumstances. Should we call their bluff and take it to a vote if need be? Or should we negotiate longer in hopes that we could bring them around to a happy solution eventually, even recognizing that this would be next year or the year after that or whatever? I was among those advocating that if we didn't seize the iron while it was hot, we would never succeed. You know, we had the momentum from the Vienna World Conference. If we couldn't do it with that, it seemed to me that the chances of doing it in subsequent years would likely be even less. I also suspected that if it came to the crunch, none of the "bad guys" would want to be seen as voting against this issue. By forcing the issue, we might yet get a consensus, and even if we didn't, we would get a High Commissioner.

The crunch point, from a procedural point of view, was the deadline for filing a resolution. If there was no resolution filed by the deadline, then there could be no vote or no adoption by the General Assembly and the issue would lapse until the next year. I argued that we should file a draft before the deadline. That would force consideration of something before the end of the UNGA session. If we achieved consensus on another text we could substitute that for ours; if not, we could still amend ours in any way we wanted and bring it to a vote. Or, we could even withdraw it later if we changed our minds for some reason. Others on the negotiating teaincluding especially the head of the team, who was one of our UN ambassadorthought that it would just make people angry for us to file a draft and that it would be better to wait until next year.

By a happy circumstance, the head of our negotiating team was away somewhere on crunch day, the last day for resolutions to be filed, leaving me in charge of the team. I was able to convince Madeleine Albright, who was then the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN, through her staff, that we really ought to go ahead and file this resolution, which would ensure that there would be a vote on a High Commissioner before the end of the session. With her approval, I gave instructions five minutes before the filing deadline for one of our team to run down and file our resolution. We waited until the last minute so that no one would have a chance to run down and file a competing resolution. We got a lot of flack from some of our own allies, who thought that filing a draft was confrontational. I remember the British representative, of all people, giving me a really hard time. And, of course, we got even more criticism from the half dozen states who were trying to drag things out. But, the bottom line was that it worked. Despite all the whining, the speed and seriousness of the negotiations improved tremendously. Once people knew that they were going have to vote on something, and that they couldn't just delay it for a year, they were far more inclined to work seriously toward an agreement. As a result, we actually did get a consensus resolution hammered out within a few days, to create a High Commissioner, which was quite a breakthrough. Even a lot of the people who had criticized me for tabling the resolution came to me later to apologize and to admit that the strategy worked well in the end, including, to his credit, my British colleague. The resolution that we finally adopted was not great, but it was adequate. The one clause I insisted on getting in there was a phrase that the High Commissioner's job is to promote and protect all human rights. That's sort of an "elastic clause;" a good High Commissioner could take that phrase and do almost anything. So, in the end, that was one of the big victories of my time in Geneva. Certainly I can't take full credit for it, there were so many people involved. But at the risk of putting modesty aside, I can't help thinking that if I weren't there, it wouldn't have happened.

Q: Did you get any feel for, were the geographical bureaus here in Washington sort of weighing in and saying you know, don't upset our clients and all that?

EICHER: On this issue not so much, no, because this was not aimed at a particular country. In general, in Geneva we would usually get the State Department's final position sent to us, rather than hearing from individual bureaus or desks. It was later, in my subsequent assignment to the human rights bureau, that I saand was involved imore internal fighting on human rights issues.

Q: When you went with the delegation to New York, did you get the feeling that this was a different world than Geneva?

EICHER: To some extent, but not a lot. I mean, I had been a delegate at previous UN General Assemblies in New York so it was not all new to me. The UN parliamentary rules and procedures were the same in New York and Geneva. More importantly, for these negotiations, I was dealing with a lot of the same people who I had been working with in Geneva and at the World Conference in Vienna. A lot of countries (but not usually the U.S.) regularly send their Geneva officers to New York to follow human rights issues that come up at the General Assembly. So, there were a lot of familiar faces at that negotiation in New York in addition to the procedures also being much the same.

Q: Did you feel that there was a change with the advent of the Clinton administration? It was more liberal, or less real politique, than, say, Bush Sr., who had a lot of experience in the United Nations and had served in China and had been around block and was perhaps more sophisticated. I may be over characterizing, but the Clinton administration came in all bright eyed and bushy tailed, sort of, on human rights. Did you feel that there was almost a fresh impetus on human rights?

EICHER: You know, interestingly, not really. The human rights policy changed only in small ways. That's one of the things I liked about it. I found it very reassuring that U.S. human rights policy changed very little, whether you had a right-wing Republican administration or a left wing Democratic administration. Everybody likes human rights. I liked working on human rights partly because you always had the moral high ground and, you know, you could feel good about what you were doing; you could believe in what you were doing. I was happy to let somebody else worry about how this might affect our trade with China or our relations with Colombia or whatever. My job was to point out that China or Colombia or whoever, were human rights violators and that we ought to do something about it. That's not to say that I didn't understand the bigger picture, but I had the luxury of being in positions where I was supposed to be advocating for policies that would promote human rights, in whatever country.

When I started in Geneva, under Bush Sr., there was actually a lot of focus on human rights. There were probably more State Department personnel devoted to human rights in the UN under Bush than there were under Clinton, when he came in. Certainly in the Bureau of International Organizations there were more people dealing with human rights under Bush than under Clinton, including a couple of high-level envoys. There was one gentleman, Ken Blackwelas a matter of fact, the same Ken Blackwell who is of more recent fame as the secretary of state of Ohio during the last electiowho was the Bush administration's, I can't remember what his exact title was, but in effect he was a special ambassador for human rights and delegate to the Human Rights Commission. He would come out frequently to Geneva and would lead our delegation to the Commission. He did quite a nice job.

When Clinton came in, that position ceased to exist and some of the support staff which worked for that position ceased to exist. Clinton still did name ambassadors to the Human Rights Commission and very good ones. The first one was Dick Schifter, for the first year of the Clinton administration, and then it was Geraldine Ferraro. So I worked with Gerry as her deputy at the Commission for several years. She was a joy to work with and I think her appointment showed the level of interest of the Clinton administration in international human rights. But in terms of policy, it really didn't change that much. One thing that did change was that the Clinton administration supported the creation of a High Commissioner for Human Rights, while the first Bush administration had still been waffling at the time it left office; it wasn't opposed, but it hadn't made a positive decision, either. But on almost everything else, the positions were very similar on the human rights issues we were dealing with. It's only recently, under Bush Jr., that the U.S. has changed its policies so dramatically on human rights and undercut so much of what we did and lost the high ground that the U.S. always used to be able to claim on human rights.

Q: Was Israel sort of a wild card on human rights?

EICHER: Israel was a big problem for us on human rights and it was one of the instances where it was difficult to keep the high ground. Israel did have big human rights problems. It was violating human rights in a number of very nasty ways and yet the U.S. position was to support Israel and to vote against any resolutions that condemned Israeli practices. Our rationale was that Israel was being picked on unfairly, and to a large extent that was true. There were lots of resolutions condemning Israel's human rights practices, way out of proportion to what was happening there, and the language of the resolutions was often over the top. And some of the resolutions were very political, having more to do with peace negotiation issues than with human rights. But still, some of the points in the resolutions were valid, in light of Israel's violations, and I was sometimes uncomfortable in casting "no" votes in its defense. Overall, though, UN positions on Israel were often so outrageous that they deserved to be voted down. Often, the U.S. was the only "no" vote; anti-Israel resolutions tend to draw an automatic majority in the UN.

One of the accomplishments of the Commission during my tenure was that for the first time the Commission adopted a resolution supporting the Middle East peace process. This was fun for me, having come out of Middle Eastern affairs. The resolution was a U.S. initiative and I took charge of drafting it and of the negotiations. I was actually negotiating with the PLO delegate and the Israelis on language which probably didn't belong in the Human Rights Commission at all, but we did put some human rights language in there to make it more plausible. But, basically the resolution welcomed the rapprochement between Israel and the PLO and all the good things this would mean for human rights. The resolution was adopted and it may have been the first positive words ever adopted about Israel in the Commission. So, that was another nice accomplishment.

The anti-Semitism resolution that I mentioned earlier was another plus, from the U.S. and Israeli points of view.

We also had other Middle East related problems, especially under the Bush Sr. administration, before the PLO became our friends. In particular, there was a quite nasty and ill-fated trip out to Geneva by the then-Assistant Secretary for International Organizations, John Bolton, who, as you know, later became U.S. permanent representative in New York. The goal of his mission to Geneva was to get the Human Rights Commission to disinvite Yasser Arafat from speaking before the Commission. I said this was an ill-fated mission because, if you understood the United Nations, you knew this could not happen. The PLO was accredited as an official observer organization of the United Nations and as such, it was entitled to speak. If the PLO's status at the UN was going to be changed it would have to be by a decision made in New York, not in Geneva. Now, if Assistant Secretary Bolton didn't know this much about UN procedures, or seek advice from those who did before launching a mission, this shows a real lack of both knowledge and judgment. I think Bolton was really more interested in making a political point for domestic audienceto show how strongly pro-Israeli he wathan to really try to accomplish something useful at the Human Rights Commission.

Anyhow, when he finally accepted our explanations as to why he couldn't do what he wanted, then he changed gears slightly and his crusade became "we have to be sure that he is not given any of the honors given to a head of state." In practical terms, this meant that Arafat should sit at the PLO seat in the assembly hall to give his speech, rather than standing at the podium in the front of the chamber. I'm not at all sure this was a distinction that anyone would notice or care about, aside from those who understand the most arcane UN protocol procedures. In any event, Bolton was determined. His approach to making this happen was also a bit peculiar. He decided he would try to browbeat the WEOG into accepting his position. Once WEOG accepted, he thought, then we could force the position onto the rest of the Commission Members. The whole idea was basically a non-starter. We could have told hiand, in fact did tell hithat the WEOG would not agree and even if it did, the rest of the Commission members would not agree. There was already a precedent for Arafat to speak from the front of the room and there was no way that a majority of Commission members were going to support a change to that. Bolton brushed off any objections we tried to make. He had with him a recent tape recording of Arafat calling Jews "dogs" and he thought that would convince people to crack down on him. I don't think anyone was surprised, however, to learn that Arafat made anti-Semitic remarks. Bolton played the tape at the morning WEOG meeting and then gave an impassioned lecturreally, he was shouting and red-faceto the assembled ambassadors telling them they had to prevent Arafat from standing at the front of the room. His presentation was so embarrassingly out-of-control that it was followed by a stunned silence. The ambassadors, to no one's particular surprise, except Bolton's, were offended by the manner of his presentation. When no one else asked for the floor, the WEOG chairman said "Thank you. Since there are no other comments, we'll move on to the next order of business," and he changed the subject. Bolton was flabbergasted, outraged, that his proposal would not even be discussed by the WEOG, much less accepted. I remember the French Ambassador eventually took the floor and returned to the subject and gave Bolton a mild-mannered dressing down, saying that the WEOG didn't need to be lectured in that fashion by an American representative and that he disagreed also on the substance of the proposal. A couple of other WEOG members did the same. I should add that Bolton also took the liberty of inviting the Israeli ambassador to attend the WEOG meeting, which was a real no-no under WEOG procedures. The meetings were held at the German mission and they refused to let him into the meeting room, so he sat outside in the lobby while all this was going on. It was embarrassing for everyone. The only result of the whole episode was to strain our relations with the WEOG. Arafat came to the Commission and spoke from the front of the room.

Q: Bolton is, to say the least, a controversial character and in a way, this has been his modus operandi, to be a controversial character and a publicity-seeker from the far right. I mean, this is the way he gets his sustenance. How did you, when Bolton came out and before, did you just kind of roll your eyes and you know, let him do his thing and fail or how did this work?

EICHER: Well, in fact, that was the first time that I had dealt seriously with him. We did try to explain to him the procedures and the background, as well as how the Commission and the WEOG worked, what the rules were, and what could actually be achieved and what could not be achieved. But he was determined to go his own way on this. He even had a fight in front of two or three of us from the political section, a roaring fight, with Ken Blackwell, our Ambassador to the Commission, threatening to fire him on the spot because Ken pressed our views that Bolton's plan wouldn't work. Bolton just would not be dissuaded from pursuing his goal. I think he was probably egged on by Morris Abram, our Head of Mission, who was always trying to do everything he could to support Israel. But Abram should have known better. In the end, you're probably right that Bolton was looking more at politics and at his domestic audience than he was at the chances of success or of trying to do something constructive at the UN. If you want to get something adopted at the UN, you don't announce it and try to browbeat people, you have to do a lot of careful planning and speaking quietly with people to build support, especially speaking to Third World delegations. All we did in this case was alienate our friends. We never even took it up with countries other than the WEOG, which, I guess, was just as well.

Q: I guess Burma was really almost isolated. There wasn't a hell of a lot you can do about that was there?

EICHER: No, there was not a lot we could do about Burma. The other country that we really spent a lot of time on was Yugoslavia. That started to fall apart while I was in Geneva. When the war broke out, it was a big issue in Geneva.

Q: What were you doing? What was the issue, vis-ï¿½-vis Yugoslavia, in the Commission and what were the results?

We were working on it in a number of ways, although I'm not sure how much we actually accomplished. We were able to call the first-ever special session of the Human Rights Commission, which established a precedent that the Commission could be called to meet in emergency session instead of having to wait until the regular session the following spring before it could take up a fast-breaking, serious human rights issue. So that was a nice step forward. Since the U.S. had called for and organized the special session, I ended up as chairperson of very large, informal drafting committee. Since our Yugoslavia resolution was the only item on the agenda, everyone showed up; we must have had 100 delegates who wanted to make their additions and changes to the draft. And John Bolton came out again for the special session. I'll give him some credit for that. He did support us and did a quite reasonable job in helping us on that. We were able to pass a resolution that had all the appropriate condemnations of various bad things that were going on in the former Yugoslavia. I'm not sure it made any real difference on the ground, but it did help highlight some of the problems and solidify international opinion on them. Even though you could say that it didn't accomplish much concrete, it was regarded as successful enough that we organized a second special session a few months later, as things got worse in Croatia and Bosnia. The former Yugoslavia became a fixture in human rights meetings for the remainder of my time in Geneva.

Beyond the Human Rights Commission, as things got worse in Yugoslavia, we actually established a sort of little cell within the political section to follow events there, because a lot of information was coming into Geneva, primarily through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which had its headquarters about a block from the U.S. mission. The refugee section of the U.S. mission was also much involved since UNHCR (the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) was involved, as a result of all the ethnic cleansing going on. I had a political officer who would meet every day with the Red Cross and then send in a daily report to Washington on what was going on; it was one of our best sources of information before we opened embassies in Bosnia or the other new countries. When we did recognize Bosnia, it was too dangerous to actually have an embassy in Sarajevo, so the U.S. ambassador-designate, Victor Jacovic, was based in Geneva and worked out of my political section for several months.

The first peace negotiationthe International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia (ICFY) led by Cyrus Vance - David Owewas also based in Geneva, right in the UN headquarters building there. I had an officer responsible for follow what was going on in those negotiations and would get involved myself from time to time. Aside from day-to-day coverage, there were occasional big negotiating sessions that resulted in a team coming out from Washington, often led by Secretary of State Christopher. Christopher, in fact, became a very common visitor to Geneva.

Q: Was the enormity of the... particularly the Serbian, but also Croatian, activities, that is, what the Serbs were doing to the Bosnians and to some extent the Croats, coming through? The situation there was damn close to the Holocaust, right in Europe, forty years after the end of World War II. How was this impacting on you all?

EICHER: Well, as I said, it was an issue of overwhelming interest and generated a lot of attention and work for us. We were living comfortably in Geneva so it wasn't impacting our daily lives in that sense, but it was a major tragedy and everybody recognized it as such. There was a lot of hand wringing going on. The U.S. felt the Europeans should take the lead and the Europeans couldn't get their act together to take vigorous action. The was a UN force therUNPROFObut it wasn't very effective, and administratively it was handled out of New York, not Geneva. There was an ongoing effort in Geneva to see if there was anything we could do, any way we could contribute, and that's what led to the Human Rights Commission special sessions, and to our work with the ICRC and UNHCR, and with the Vance-Owen negotiations. But, realistically, as active as we tried to be, we were to a large extent on the margins. The peace negotiations didn't really pick up steam until the Dayton talks, which was after I left Geneva, and after Vance and Owen had bowed out. One other thing we did try to do, in fact, in a very early resolution, was to help set the basis for the war crimes tribunal, but our initial effort on that in Geneva was quickly eclipsed by more serious work in Washington and New York, so war crimes moved out of the Geneva optic.

Q: Did Cuba come up at all?

EICHER: Cuba always came up. One of the main U.S. goals every year was to pass a resolution on Cuba and we did indeed do that every year. In fact, when I first arrived in 1991, my deputy, who had been there several years, briefed me and said, "Peter, there will be dozens of resolutions at the Human Rights Commission and we'll be expected to be on top of all of them, but in the final analysis, don't forget that the only one that really matters to Washington is the Cuba resolution. If we pass a Cuba resolution, the Commission is a success; if we don't, we'll be seen as having failed." I think that highlights the Cold War mentality that still prevailed when I got to Geneva. In fact, the Cuba resolution was always important for us politically, but as the Cold War dynamic ended, it was no longer the central theme of what we were trying to do at the Commission. When I got to Geneva, Cuba was the only country resolution that the U.S. took the lead on; by the time I left, we had the lead on at least half a dozen country resolutions, including China, Yugoslavia and many others that took more time than Cuba.

We actually had a lot of interaction with the Cubans, most of it very unhappy. The Cubans were extremely adept at working the Human Rights Commission and caused us an enormous amount of trouble and headaches. We succeed every year in getting our resolution adopted condemning human rights violations in Cuba. But they managed to succeed in muddying up a lot of other things we wanted to do and generally to cause trouble. In fact, they also sponsored a resolution against the U.S. every year, which was not about human rights in the United States but was one that they called "unilateral coercive measures." Basically, without naming the United States directly, it was a clear condemnation of the U.S. trade and financial embargo against Cuba. And, every year the Cubans were able to get most of the countries of the Commission, in fact a large majority of countries in the Commission, to agree to a resolution saying that "unilateral" embargos like the U.S. embargo on Cubour trade restrictions on Cuba, which they would call a "blockade" were coercive measures and were a human rights violation that should be condemned. And they succeeded in that.

Q: This sounds like shadowboxing or something.

EICHER: It was shadowboxing to some extent. We would pass our resolution against them, and they would pass their resolution against us. Ours was certainly more significant, however, since it would name Cuba directly, and since it appointed a special rapporteur to investigate and report on human rights problems in Cuba. Still, you're right that there was a lot of shadow boxing going on at the Human Rights Commission and, in fact, that could sometimes be a lot of fun to work on. I much enjoyed negotiating in the United Nations and many of the endless debates and talks over how you were going to word something, or how you could promote your initiative or kill someone else's bad initiative, or how you could word an amendment that could get adopted and substantially change the meaning of a resolution you didn't like. Sometimes it would be scoring points over your opponents rather than necessarily creating anything that would really matter in the real world. So, this part of the work could be fun, or could be frustrating, but a lot of it was just a game. We realized that. I had visitors who would come out for a few days to help with one issue or another who would say, "Oh, my God. Condemn or strongly condemn? Deplore or deeply deplore, what difference does it make? How can you deal with this every day?" Once you got immersed into the minutia, however, you started to realize that in the context you were working in, it did make a bit of a difference.

Further on the Cubans, when I say they were excellent at causing trouble, it went way beyond the "universal coercive measures" resolution. Every year they would come up with some truly evil little ideas that, if adopted, would have undermined the UN human rights structure that we were trying to build up. It would be almost full-time work for a couple of members of our delegation to try to head off various bad Cuban initiatives. With the help of the Europeans, we were usually able to render them harmless, but sometimes they would score points. They were masters at coming up with things that, on the surface, would appeal to other Third World countries. There was a shifting little group of other countries that we sometimes called "the bad guys," including Iran and Syria, among others, who were always ready to work with the Cubans. It was very irritating. But, a lot of us got to know each other and there was some camaraderie, too. In later years, at the OSCE, where there were no such overt "bad guys," I sometimes actually missed not being able to have a good, parliamentary fight with the Cubans and Iranians. It could really get your adrenaline going.

Q: Let's take, still sticking to human rights, after four years there, did you see any machinery that was set up that was making a difference between whether somebody got their fingernails pulled out or not?

EICHER: I think we did. I think we really made some progress. I think the things we did really helped some people. How much of it was due directly to our work or how much was the happy confluence of events in the world that we were able to take advantage of, somebody else would have to judge. But we did create a lot of UN mechanisms which are making a difference. We created a lot of special rapporteurs, who are special UN envoys who go look at particular problems or particular countries and publicize problems and try to persuade the governments to improve practices. So, there is a special rapporteur on torture and a special rapporteur on religious freedom and a special rapporteur on independence of the judiciary and a whole string of others, most of which were created during my time in Geneva, who are out there highlighting problems, proposing solutions and making a difference. Plus, of course, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the advent of actual UN human rights offices in different countries of the world have started to change the international culture about human rights and the acceptability of foreigners raising human rights as an issue. I think these mechanisms have started to get some governments to behave more responsibly in some cases. We also created new treaty provisions on human rights, for example, a protocol to the anti-torture convention under which an international team could visit prisons, unannounced, to check on conditions and what was happening there. The U.S. used to support that kind of initiative; we really believed in fighting torture. And, of course, with every resolution, we were setting standards of what the international community should be abiding by. For example, I think one of our Yugoslavia resolutions was the first time that rape was labeled as a war crime. That had important implications for later efforts to prosecute crimes.

So it was rewarding in that sense. You know, as often as you didn't get the result you wanted to on a particular resolution, or even though you sometimes felt like you were only playing politics or working around the margins of important issues, very often you really did feel as if you were making a difference. I think our work did improve people's lives and cast a bit of light into the darkness. I think we did save some individuals here and there, and hold some brutal regimes to account, and establish some lasting procedures. So you could feel good about human rights work. I liked doing it; I felt like I had found my niche.

I think that perhaps one of the lasting legacies of some of the work we dithe work we participated in, and in some cases launcheis that now, within the United Nations system, human rights is truly ingrained as one of the major, mainstream issues. When I got to Geneva one of the goals I had was to try to bring human rights out of the narrow confines of the Human Rights Commissions and into the broader work of the UN and the other UN agencies. I visited a lot of agencies and I asked them about it. Almost uniformly, they would recoil. You know, the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees would say, "Oh, no. Human rights is a political issue; keep it in the Human Rights Commission," and WHO would say, "it's a political issue, keep it away from us." And this is the kind of response I got, from one agency after the other. By the time I left Geneva, every one of these same agencies was proudly saying, "We do human rights; we work on human rights; our program is based on human rights." Even UNICEF, which may be the least political of the agencies, was saying that their entire program was based on a human rights convention that originated in the Human Rights Commission, the Convention on the Rights of the Child. So it was a real change in approach. In the work of the UN now, human rights is almost always taken into account as a matter of both policy and bureaucratic procedure; there is a human rights person sitting at the table during policy discussions, and there are human rights experts attached to most UN field offices. So I think that's an important legacy.

Q: Did you see any NGOs, non-governmental organizations, taking on a stronger role as being an unofficial adjunct to the whole human rights process?

EICHER: I think so. As a result of human rights having a greater role, their influence also became greater. You also have to give them a lot of credit because they're the ones who are on the ground, around the world, finding out what the problems are and publicizing them, often at great personal risk. Very often they face persecution for trying to get the word out. I have tremendous admiration for them. They also came up with lots of ideas on how to promote human rights, some of which were great. They were happy to share ideas and delighted if a government actually took up one of the ideas and supported it.

Q: Over the years, over time, we're talking about the last couple of decades, these groups have really become an extremely important element.

EICHER: Absolutely. We always found that you could work in partnership with them to great effect. A lot of officials, including American officials, considered NGOs a pain because they were always criticizing us as well as other countries, and they were never satisfied; they always wanted you to do more. But you need to accept that that was their job, their purpose, to urge governments to do more. As a representative of a country trying to promote human rights, I quickly came to understand that the NGOs were our natural allies, even if they didn't always agree with our positions. And they were generally easy to work with and to get along with. They were so used to being blown off or ignored by government delegations that they were really pleased when a delegation was actually willing to take them seriously and cooperate with them, even if you couldn't always agree with them. I spent a lot of time with them and gave events for them at my home. They made wonderful partners.

Q: I don't know if this is still in your province but with the rending aside of the Iron Curtain, one real negative was human trafficking, essentially the recruitment of Eastern European young women to become prostitutes. Often they did not know what they were getting into. This whole trafficking of humans and also, I guess, of young boys and all. Did that fall under your province at all?

EICHER: This was just starting to be seen as a big issue at the time I was in Geneva. It wasn't yet seen as an East European problem at the time, but it was emerging as an issue that was referred to either as "modern day forms of slavery" or as "sale of children," depending on which facet of it you were considering. There were a few activists and NGOs already doing some work on "modern day forms of slavery," which included everything from vestiges of slavery-like practices in Mauritania, to forcible recruitment of child soldiers in Sudan, to sweat shops and various kinds of indentured labor, as well as what we now call human trafficking. The U.S. had not really taken this up as a big issue yet.

The "sale of children" aspect of it, like so many other human rights issues, became very politicized. The U.S. was against taking action on this issue because, I think, there wasn't a clear understanding of what was really going on with modern day slavery and because the Cubans and some others were successfully twisting it to suggest that American adoptions of Central American children was part of the problem of "sale of children." There was even one very awkward evening at the Human Rights Commission when I was in the U.S. chair, during an effort by the Commission to get approval for drafting a new conventioor more technically a protocol to the existing Convention on the Rights of the Chilon the subject of sale of children. We had instructions that if it came to a vote, we the U.S. should vote "no." The European country that was in charge of derailing this resolutioPortugal, as I recalmanaged to mangle it, and all the European countries then suddenly changed their positions to support the resolution. We were left standing alone in opposition. The optics were terriblthe U.S. was the only country in the world blocking progress on protecting children from predators. There was no time for new consultations with Washington to modify the U.S. position. So, after a lot of unpleasant back-and-forth debate on the floor of the Commission, I made a policy decision and violated my instructions and joined consensus on the resolution. I thought Washington would be furious and worried about what kind of reprimand I might get. But, as it turned out, no one in Washington seemed to care very much, so I guess the story had a happy ending. The protocol in question was eventually drafted and adopted, and it is now part of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most countries have ratified it, but the U.S. never even ratified the Convention, much less the protocol.

As for human trafficking as we know the issue today, it had not yet become a well-publicized issue while I was working in Geneva. A bit later in my life, when I was working for the OSCE, I worked a lot on combating trafficking; I actually established the first OSCE programs to combat trafficking.

Q: What about Rwanda?

EICHER: Rwanda did happen, yes. That was one of the huge human rights tragedies that happened while I was in Geneva. Maybe the biggest. We did have a special session of the Human Rights Commission on Rwanda. I was there for the preparations but didn't attend the actual session, since I was back in the U.S. for my oldest son's wedding. The Human Rights Commission did adopt a resolution, which, I guess, helped attract world attention to the horrors that were going on there, even if it didn't change much on the ground. But on Rwanda, what can I say? The world failed Rwanda. There were just too many crises going on at once. Most Western focus was still on Yugoslavia. Even on that, the West wasn't ready to intervene militarily, and that was much closer to home and getting much more media attention. There were also little wars going on in a number of the former Soviet countries, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia. The war in Chechnya was also starting. Everyone was still talking about the "peace dividend" that was supposedly coming with the end of the Soviet Union and, instead, here were little wars breaking out all over the place. Governments didn't have the stomach for military intervention, especially in Africa, which seemed so much further away. In fact, only a few months before, the Clinton administration had tried a small scale military intervention in Somalia to restore peace there, which ended up being a failure; remember, the U.S. withdrew after a Blackhawk helicopter was shot down and bodies of American soldiers were dragged through the streets. So the U.S. really wasn't ready for another African adventure and other countries didn't step up to the plate, either.

The crises in Yugoslavia, and especially in Rwanda, did get people talking about the idea of "humanitarian intervention" as a right or a duty of states when horrible things were going on in a country. The idea was very controversial because normally the UN wouldn't interfere in any country's internal problems unless they also threatened international peace and security. The genocide in Rwanda helped make the idea of humanitarian intervention respectable, if not fully accepted.

Eventually, later on, Rwanda became the first country in which the UN established a human rights office, under the authority of the new High Commissioner for Human Rights. So that in that sense, looking through a bureaucratic lens, the machinery that we had set up by creating a High Commissioner was ultimately used to help deal with the aftermath of the genocide. But international efforts on the genocide itself were totally inadequate and too late.

In fact, back then everyonincluding the United Statewas unwilling to concede that what was going on in either Yugoslavia or Rwanda was genocide. There is a UN Convention against Genocide, that the U.S. and most other countries have ratified, that obliges the signatories to take action to end genocide if it is taking place. So the U.S. at first avoided using the "g" word, and eventually starting using the term "acts of genocide," instead of just plain "genocide," since the lawyers said that would not trigger our obligations under the treaty. It was crazy.

Q: Was Rwanda one of these things that developed so quickly that it was almost not feasible to have a real response, or not?

EICHER: Being in Geneva, I wasn't really close enough to the policy makers to be able to make a real judgment on that. Certainly, it happened very quickly and unexpectedly, at least from our perspective in Geneva. It was also over fairly quickly; it lasted only about three months, I think, which, of course, is a long time if you're on the ground watching people get killed, but a short time in terms of building up momentum for international intervention in a crises. Yugoslavia, in contrast, went on for years. I think it would have been possible for the international community to have a more vigorous response to Rwanda, which might not have prevented the genocide from starting, but would have ended it more quickly. But for all those reasons I mentioneand probably other reasons that I didn't know or have since forgottethere was just no inclination by the international community to get involved, until it was way too late.

Q: Did that hang over you? Were people coming in and telling you about the horror stories or was there sort of a filter to that while you were there?

EICHER: The information we got was indirect. I didn't have a lot of people coming in telling me specifically about what was happening in Rwanda. There weren't Rwandans getting on airplanes to Geneva to tell their stories personally. But we were getting information from the International Red Cross and from UN agencies and from NGOs and even from our own government. It would be nice to say that the international community didn't act because it didn't know what was going on, but I think people had a reasonable idea what was going on. Perhaps there wasn't a full grasp of how extensive, how massive the genocide was, but there was enough information to know that there was a really big, serious problem going on in Rwanda.

Q: Before we leave Geneva, I think we'd better talk about some of the other aspects of this. We've talked almost completely on human rights. Were there any other issues you were involved in?

EICHER: Yes, there were quite a few. I spent a reasonable amount of time with the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). I had an officer working full time on each of those in my section. For me, it was mainly a supervisory role, although there were issues that I got involved in. In particular, each of those organizations would have big annual meetings, the World Health Assembly and the International Labor Conference. I was always on those delegations, which were often headed by a U. S. cabinet secretary; usually, the Secretary of Health and Human Services and Secretary of Labor would come out for the meetings. It was often Donna Shalala and Robert Reich during most of my time. In the WHO, a lot of the issues were technical health issues which I didn't have much to do with. But there were always political issues that would come up; a certain number of political issues would always arise within these organizations and that's really what I was there to deal with.

One issue you could count on almost every year was a membership issue: are we going to let the PLO have a seat or not? We were always trying to make sure the PLO did not get admitted as a state, although we didn't try to block observer status for the PLO. But every year it seemed that there would be a fight in the credentials committee, with someone trying to sneak the PLO in while we weren't looking, so we would have to be there to object and to fight it off. Then we started to have the same kind of fight about Yugoslavia. Our position was that when Yugoslavia broke up, Serbia did not automatically become the successor state that automatically got Yugoslavia's seat in the UN and other organizations. The Serbs were already regarded as the aggressors in the Yugoslavia conflict and we didn't want them to be rewarded as the legitimate government entitled to a seat at the table at every international organization; we thought they should apply for membership, just like Croatia and Bosnia and the other successor states had to do. The Serbs, however, took the view that they were the successor state and acted as though they automatically inherited the UN and other agency memberships. So, one of the sometimes-tedious things we were doing at all the different agencies in Geneva was trying to make sure that the Serbian regime did not show up and claim the Yugoslavian seat. In fact, we had to brief every delegation to every small technical meeting about this and ask them to give us a call immediately if any Yugoslav appeared. This happened often, at first, and I or one of my political officers would have to run down to whatever meeting it was and give the standard speech about why Serbia should not claim the successor seat for Yugoslavia. Sometimes we had to demand a vote or obstruct proceedings until we could get them out of there. We had to deal with this issue at the Health Assembly and the International Labor Conference.

Q: Were we carrying that particular pail of water or were other delegations doing the same thing?

EICHER: Most of the Europeans were with us. Their missions weren't quite as big and well organized as we were and often didn't have people attending the little technical meetings like we always did, so very often we would be the first to hear about the problem. But, since they shared our position, one of the things we would do if a Yugoslav did show up was to phone around right away to the other missions and make sure that other representatives who shared our views appeared at whatever little technical meeting it was, to join us in our objection. Sometimes they would even take the lead in objecting. There was a period where the Serbian membership issue came up constantly, but eventually the Serbs realized they were beaten and showed up less often.

There were also other political issues that would come up. One issue that seemed to come up regularly in the World Health Assembly, for example, was an item called "the health effects of nuclear war." This was an attempt by a few of the radical Third World countries to stick it to the United States. The idea was that the U.S., being the last remaining superpower, should get rid of all of its nuclear weapons in the interest of world health. Well, I guess you can't argue that nuclear weapons aren't bad for people's health, but this was clearly a disarmament issue that had no business being decided in the World Health Assembly. There were all kinds of strategic arms limitation talks going on in Geneva; that was the place to discuss disarmament, not in the WHO. Those were the kinds of things that would come up. There were also leadership issues. The head of the WHO was a Japanese man, Dr. Nakajima, who had proved to be a very ineffective administrator. We were trying to organize a campaign to get him replaced, but even though pretty much everyone acknowledged that he was bad for the organization, the Japanese were pretty effective in keeping him there. He was eventually replaced, but not until after I left Geneva.

One other interesting issue that kept coming up at the WHO during my timwhich really wasn't a political issue that I had to deal witwas the question of whether to destroy the last remaining smallpox virus. Smallpox had been entirely eliminated as a disease all over the world; there hadn't been a single case anywhere, in years. The two last remaining samples of the virus were held by the U.S. and the Russians at secure health laboratories. So, there was this ongoing discussion of whether it was better to destroy them, and thus permanently rid the world of what had been such a terrible scourge over many centuries, or keep them, because we shouldn't be destroying the last of a species, no matter how bad it seemed to be. The inclination on all sides at the time was leaning to destroying them, but the final decision was never actually taken, so the specimens remained, hopefully, still safely locked up. In light of this background, I was amazed when I heard a couple of years ago that the current Bush administration was undertaking a massive program to produce smallpox vaccine and inoculate all the American soldiers going to Iraq against smallpox. I still can't understand why this was necessary, unless we were wrong all those years in Geneva about the last viruses being tucked safely away, or unless it was all a propaganda effort to try to show that Saddam Hussein really did have a biological warfare program.

Q: At one time, particularly early oand my oral histories go back to the beginning of the Cold Wathere was tremendous emphasis on labor unions as a bulwark against the Soviets, who were trying to establish their own unions. Particularly as the political strength of labor unions had gone down in the United States, did you get a feeling that the International Labor Organization was not really a very high priority?

EICHER: Well, certainly I would agree that it was not a very high priority among all the issues and organizations we had to deal with in Geneva. But it did get some attention; as I said, the annual delegation to the International Labor Conference was sometimes headed by a cabinet secretary, at least during the Clinton administration. Since I knew so little about the ILO before I got to Geneva, I was struck at how big and active and well regarded it was. I was impressed at how effectively it operated. The ILO actually predates the United Nations. Even though it's now considered a United Nations specialized agency, it's older than the United Nations. It operates on a tripartite basis, which is unique. Every delegation, every country's delegation, is made up of three components: government, labor and employers. So you really are including all the three of the components you need in order to try to reach some kind of consensus or agreement to move things forward on labor issues. I guess in my ignorance I had expected the ILO to be made up of a bunch of labor leaders pressing for action on their issues. And there were a lot of labor leaders, of course, but there were also a lot of chamber of commerce people and businessmen and government officials. Almost every year there would be an effort to pass a couple of new conventions setting new and better standards on some pressing aspect of labor law or labor conditions. Some of these were major issues, like child labor, but a lot of them were just little things around the margins, say, setting agreed, minimum international safety standards in industries using some particular type of dangerous materials. There are now over 200 international labor conventions; it's a wonderful body of standards, even though some of them are not very strict. About a dozen of them make up the "core conventions" that people cared most about, but there were also many others. These conventions are treaties, which legally bind countries to abide by them once they have been ratified. The ILO continues to set standards and to monitor the implementation of standards on many, many labor and safety issues. It's quite a useful process. I was really very impressed with the ILO and was happy to have been involved with it.

Q: What about say, India and Pakistan, particularly India, a big democracy but one where an awful lot of kids, very young kids, are involved in child labor. How was it dealt with.

EICHER: The ILO wasn't generally an organization where you would take a particular country to task for what it was doing. You know, if you wanted to criticize India on child labor, you would do it in the Human Rights Commission, not at the ILO. Delegations at the ILO usually tried to maintain a constructive, cooperative approach. Because of the tripartite nature of the delegations, even India's delegation would have labor leaders who were likely to be saying the same about child labor as India's critics would be. It wasn't an organization where I recall there being a lot of high-level confrontation and finger-pointing, although sometimes that did happen. More likely, if the ILO saw a problem with child labor in India, it would look for ways of trying to put new rules in place aimed at making things better. For example, there might be a new convention that would prohibit child labor in dangerous industries, like the glass industry or the match industry, or that would limit or end some specific practices. You know, recognizing the reality that children are working, at least let's start by getting them out of the more dangerous industries, and make a step toward ending the worst abuses. The ILO also had mechanisms to check on how countries were doing in meeting their obligations.

Q: In human rights, was child labor a problem, an issue?

EICHER: It was an issue that did come up, although it was not a front-burner issue. One particular children's issue which came up during my time was street children. The Europeans, in particular, seemed to be very interested in trying to do something about the problem of street children in Latin America.

Q: Brazil, of course, is a prime example.

EICHER: Exactly. Although street children are a problem in many countries, the situation is particularly bad in Brazil and, although the Brazilians were not specifically named in a resolution, they certainly felt like it was criticism aimed at them. In fact, I have to admit that as much as I recognized street children as a problem, I was not very happy to see the Europeans take this issue up in the Human Rights Commission because, if you recall, I said that we had been able to forge a coalition of Eastern and Western Europeans and Latin Americans, that was critical in order to get enough votes to pass anything positive in the Commission. So, as the Europeans started targeting Latin American democracies on this kind of issue, those countries started wavering on their support for us on some of the other issues, like China, or Burma or other things we wanted their help on. Still, I remember that we did pass a resolution on street children. We were able to maintain Latin support on most of the other issues, but it became more difficult once they found themselves as targets.

The other child issues that we were involved in, included negotiating a couple of protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I've already mentioned the protocol on "sale of children." Another protocol was on the age of military service. That one was an effort to make it an international standard that kids could not be recruited into the armed forces until they turned eighteen. This was a problem for the United States because at the time we could still recruit people at seventeen and a half.

Q: As far as I know, regardless of past standards, people joined the military and particularly the navy, at seventeen.

EICHER: I think the U.S. has now changed its policy on that, partly as a result of this protocol that was negotiated in Geneva and even though the U.S. has never ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I think our first gambit was, "OK, we recruit at seventeen and a half, but we'll make sure no one goes into combat until age eighteen." I was actually surprised when the U.S. changed its position on this and now, I believe, we do not recruit people younger than eighteen. This was actually a bigger problem for some of our allies than for us. The British and Dutch, I think, still had a practice of enlisting boys of sixteen on naval ships as cabin boys. They also phased that out, I think. So this, maybe, is one more example of our work at the Commission having an effect in the real world.

Q: One last question. With the political appointees coming in and ouyou mentioned Boltowas there, in the four years you were there, did you see much of a clash between the political types versus the career types in what you were doing?

EICHER: Other than that one incident with Bolton that I mentioned, very little. Again, it was very reassuring that human rights had a solid backing within all stripes of the U.S. government, under both Republican and Democratic administrations. To some extent, interestingly, the more liberal Democrats and the more conservative Republicans would tend to have the same views on human rights issues, and it was the middle-of-the-road politicians who would sometimes let you down. These were often reasonable people but, while they supported human rights, they would often look at the bigger foreign policy picture and their views on trade relations and so forth might trump their concerns about human rights. China was a good example of this; the middle-of-the-road politicians would speak out about human rights problems in China, but then vote for permanent most-favored-nation status for trade with China. But the very conservative Republicanthe libertarians and politicians concerned about individual rights and too much government meddlinand very liberal Democrats tended to be very solid supporters of human rights in any country.

Q: You know, when you think about it, it's a little hard for anyone to say, "Well, you know, yes, we know they're beating up and jailing people, but we we've got other fish to fry."

EICHER: Indeed. One of the things I loved about working in human rights was you always had the moral high ground. You could really believe in the positions you took, really have confidence that you were doing what was right. I liked human rights work enough that I spent the rest of my career on it. When I left Geneva in 1995 the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, who I had gotten to know fairly well from his trips to Geneva and through our work together at the World Conference on Human Rights, John Shattuck, asked me to come back and be his special assistant in Washington.

To wrap up on Geneva, I should just say that living there was very nice, as you might expect. It was a small city, only about 300,000 people I think, but it felt very cosmopolitan because, being a UN headquarters, there were so many international people there. There wasn't all that much to do right in Geneva, but we entertained officially quite a bit and had a busy official social life. We also made a lot of good friends. Two of our sons graduated from the international school there, which they liked very much. Geneva was beautifully situated right on the lake and within easy drive of an endless number of wonderful old castles, or medieval villages or alpine resorts. Switzerland was so beautiful we used to say it was like living in a postcard. And Geneva was a great base to get around to other places. We could drive to France in six minutes from our house, and could be in Italy within an hour's drive. Germany was only a couple of hours away. So, we ended up seeing a lot of Europe, which was a great plus.

Q: Okay. We'll pick this up in 1995 when you were working for John Shattuck on human rights. Could you sort of give a feel for how things stood when you arrived at the human rights bureau? Could you give a feel for where the human rights bureau stood, bureaucratically, in the Department? During the early Carter years, Pat Darien was really upsetting the staid halls of the State Department, charging around on human rights issues but, by this time, how would you describe it?

EICHER: By the time I returned to Washington, I had been working on human rights in Geneva for four years, so I felt well connected to the bureau.

In any case, the human rights bureau was very active and it was well established in the bureaucracy. In fact, it had recently changed its name from Hwhich was, I think, originally, the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, before humanitarian affairs became a separate, refugee bureato DRL, which stood for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. I think the name change came at the beginning of the Clinton administration, when they created the new Under Secretary for Global Affairs, known as "G." DRL was one of the G bureaus. Anyway, the name change was recent and most people around the Department still called us HA; we had to constantly remind people of the new name. In any event, the bureau was well established bureaucratically. We were invited to meetings and we were usually remembered in the clearance process. In general we didn't have to push our way into most things. And, I should say, the importance of supporting human rights had been accepted as a basic element of U.S. policy. The major battles in that sense had been fought already. Everyone purported to support human rights, it was just a question of how much emphasis to give to human rights, as compared to other issues.

However, DRL was, I think, like most of the "functional bureaus" in the Departmenthat is, the bureaus dealing with issues rather than specific geographical areareally regarded as something of a backwater. Human rights still weren't mainstream. The real power in the Department was on the geographic desks. From a policy perspective, while we might be invited to meetings and get copies of cables and things like that, we did have to push very hard in most cases, when we wanted human rights to be considered as a real issue in our relationship with countries.

Q: So you were with the bureau from when to when?

EICHER: From 1995 until the very beginning of 1998. For the first year I was there I was special assistant to John Shattuck and after one year I moved over and became the Director of the Office of Bilateral Affairs, which was by far the largest office in DRL.

Q: Let's start with John Shattuck. Can you describe your impression of him as an operator within the State Department system?

EICHER: He was quite an operator and he was very well-connected. He was a tremendous activist. He was just a whirlwind. He was on the move all the time. He tried to have an impact on a lot of different issues and he soon discovered that there were problems in trying to move human rights issues within the State Department bureaucracy, that people sometimes didn't want to hear about human rights because they were a problem for other parts of our relationships with countries. One of the methods he had devised to deal with this was to sort of insert himself indirectly by traveling to places that were controversial or to trouble spots where there were particular human rights problems. Just by being there, as an assistant secretary, he would get a lot of attention on the ground and have a lot of high level meetings. He would do a lot of reporting back to the secretary and other top officials, and the trips required a lot of coordination with other bureaus. So, he sort of forced the other bureaus to include him in the policy mix, through his tendency and willingness to dash off to Bosnia or Rwanda or Turkey or Indonesia or wherever the trouble spot of the moment happened to be. So that was effective, to a certain extent, in ensuring that human rights stayed on the agenda of whatever country or countries we felt we needed to press our case on. It also helped a lot in policy debates in the Department, since instead of just interjecting some vague point of principle on human rights, he could say, "Well, I was just in country X and ...."

As his special assistant, I did travel with him from time to time. I could have gone much more, but he was constantly on the road and I didn't really want to be away that much. At the time, the bureau's focus, its overwhelming focus, was on Bosnia. The war in Bosnia was still very rough at that time, even though negotiations had started. The Dayton talks actually took place during the period while I was special assistant. Shattuck was at the Dayton talks and I was backing him up from Washington. If you look at the Dayton Agreement, you'll see that it is very heavy on human rights. The constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina that came out of Dayton is also very heavy on human rights, much more, even, than the U.S. constitution. I believe there were so many human rights provisions included partly as a result of Shattuck's influence.

Another major thing we were trying to do on Bosnia was set up and support the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the Bosnia war crimes tribunal. This was a big issue in the bureau, and in the Department. I went with Shattuck to The Hague a couple of times to try to move this forward. There were some difficult bureaucratic problems that were standing in the way of U.S. assistance to the tribunal, which we had to work out. We'd meet with the chief prosecutor, who was Louise Arbour at the time, and with others. Arbour is now the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. We also went to Brussels regularly to coordinate with the Europeans on human rights issues.

I also had a couple of trips with Shattuck to the former Yugoslavia, which were quite tough trips at the time, because although most of the active fighting had stopped on the ground by that time, it was still a reasonably dangerous place. On my first trip we were trying to go to Banja Luka, which was the biggest Serb city in Bosnia, and there had not been an official U.S. visitor there at all. We were going to get there by helicopter from Zagreb. But, the fog was very bad in the Balkans at that time of year and so we were fogged in and the helicopters couldn't fly out of Zagreb. We ended up trying to go by way of Sarajevo by road, but in Sarajevo we were warned that the road trip was too long and too dangerous. We had almost given up, in fact, we had given up on doing it, but then when we got back to Sarajevo airport, Shattuck noticed that there were some military helicopters parked on the ground there and he asked, "why can't we take those helicopters?" We made a few telephone calls and amazingly, I don't know how, but we ended up taking those helicopters. I don't remember whose helicopters they were; they probably belonged to the UN forces, who I suppose were the only people who would have had helicopters in Bosnia at the time. So, we flew into Banja Luka, as the first official Americans to visit for a long time, perhaps even since the start of the war. It was more symbolic than anything else. We didn't really have any particularly useful meetings.

Q: This was after the Dayton Accords?

EICHER: I think that was before the Dayton Accords. The Dayton Accords were a little bit later on.

Q: When you got there what was the bureau view of what was happening in Bosnia?

EICHER: It was grave. Bosnia was one of the major human rights disasters of our time and it was still going on, right in the heart of Europe. There were camps, and murders and torture and ethnic cleansing and so forth. I guess our perspective on stopping the war was to stop the human rights violations. We wanted to ensure peace with justice, as opposed to a peace that forgave all of the war criminals for things they might have done. We very strongly believed that you would not have a lasting peace if you let all the war criminals off scot free. So this made the negotiations much more difficult and made the human rights bureau position within the Department not always quite so welcome because, of course, it's hard to make peace with somebody if you're telling him that he might go to jail as soon as he signs the peace treaty. Still, this did come to be the U.S. position, to the extent that we established the war crimes tribunal, without specifying in advance, of course, who the tribunal might ultimately indict and how it might go about its work.

Q: What was your impression of people that you and Shattuck would meet on the various sides in Bosnia?

EICHER: They were tough cookies but they were not, all in all, all that impressive from my perspective. We met with a few of the people who have ended up convicted by the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. I'm having trouble recalling some of their names but there was a woman president of the Republica Srpska, Mrs. Plavsic, I think, who subsequently pleaded guilty in The Hague and is in prison. There was Kraisnic, I believe his name was, one of the Bosnian Serbs who was the number two in the country, in fact, who also was convicted by the tribunal. In general they seemed to be pretty sleazy characters. You could imagine that they actually were responsible for what they were accused of doing. We didn't meet with Karadzic or Mladic, of course; they were already off limits.

We met with Croatian and Serbian leaders as well, none of whom stand out particularly in my mind. I remember being excluded from a meeting with Milosevic on direct orders from Richard Holbrooke, who was the Assistant Secretary for European Affairs. John Shattuck and I met with Holbrooke before taking the trip out to meet Milosevic and Holbrooke told Shattuck, "You have to go absolutely by yourself. The ambassador can join you, but nobody else is allowed in the meeting." I think this was in line with Holbrooke's generally secretive style.

In Bosnia, we also spent a lot of time meeting with the Red Cross and with the nongovernmental organizations and others, which gave us a very grim view of some of the things that had been done. A lot of this had already been in the newspapers, but when something is in the paper it is sometimes put down to rumor, while when the same thing gets reported by a senior American official it starts to carry a bit more weight, so more and more we were able to get human rights onto the political agenda. At Dayton, the agreement which was reached was just full of human rights, as I've already said, and it required the parties in Bosnia to accept a big range of human rights treaties and human rights obligations, which was really quite something.

Q: I was listening to a presentation last night and some were saying some of the Dayton Accords essentially were rewarding Serbian aggression. What was the feeling?

EICHER: In a sense, perhaps. There is plenty of room to debate about the results of Dayton. The discussion is ongoing. I think it was pretty close to the best that could be achieved at the time. Remember, all the sides agreed to it. In principle it didn't really yield to the Serbs in the sense that the right of return for refugees and IDPs (internally displaced persons) was built in to the accords, even if they were not fully implemented in practice. I believe that the people who chose not to go back to their former places of residencwhich ended up being most peoplwere compensated for their losses. Serbs who had occupied houses belonging to other ethnic groups, and vice versa, were eventually pushed out or made to pay compensation. That part of the treaty actually did work pretty well, although it took a long time. Dayton didn't really create a unitary state, of course, and that's the sense in which some people might say that it rewarded the Serbs, since it divided Bosnia into different ethnic areas. But, the subsequent negotiations, post-Dayton, which continued to develop the peace agreement, forced Bosnia more and more toward becoming a unitary state. Dayton was the framework that allowed that to happen, by essentially making Bosnia an international protectorate headed by an internationally appointed High Representative, who eventually was given dictatorial powers. So if there may have initially seemed to be a reward for aggression, if you want to call it that, it was pretty much undone in subsequent years by the international administration. The moves toward a unitary state are continuing, and now you have the ironic specter of the ethnic Serbs, who were pretty much forced into the agreement, now talking about how they want to preserve Dayton, since its terms are looser than the situation that has since evolved. These days, if you drive through Bosnia you can't tell when you're passing the border between the Republica Srpska and the other parts of Bosnia.

Back at the time of Dayton, the international community still didn't want to intervene militarily or to send a military force into Bosnia until after the parties had agreed to a peace settlement. That limited international leverage and forced compromises. So, on the one hand you had people saying that Dayton rewarded Serb aggression and on the other hand you had people saying that the peace was unworkable because the refugees would never go back to their homes and it would have led to a stronger peace just to accept the reality of the situation on the ground, partition the country and be done with it. Dayton was a compromise. All in all, it worked pretty well, although Bosnia is still a fragile place. Even going back half a dozen years later, when the peace was well established, you could still see that the situation was fragile. People had a stake in the peace, but some of the old animosities were still there. If the international community didn't have a continuing presence there, it wouldn't be too hard for the hotheads on all sides to stir up trouble again.

Q: What did you find at Banja Luka when you went there?

EICHER: We found a quiet little town, or city, I guess I should say, since I think Banja Luka was the second largest city in Bosnia, even though it's not a very big place. It was depressing in its own way, but not particularly unpleasant. It was one of the places in Bosnia where there had not been active fighting, so although it was suffering from an economic downturn and you could see that it had not been kept up, there was not a lot of destruction in Banja Luka as there was in many other parts of the country.

Q: Had the mosque been destroyed at that point?

EICHER: The mosque had been destroyed, yes. That was the one gaping example of destruction, and very sad, indeed that people felt like they needed to destroy a mosque. There was a lot of destruction of religious buildings during the war. We walked over and looked at the site where the mosque had been and there was nothing but a vacant lot to be seen. We went and knocked on the door of the imam's house, who still lived in Banja Luka, to see if we could meet him but we were unsuccessful in that; he wasn't in.

Q: Who was collecting the evidence that eventually would be turned over to the Hague Tribunal? Was this part of the human rights mandate?

EICHER: We did not have people in Bosnia who were separately collecting anything at the time. The U.S. representatives who were there at the embassthere was an embassy by this timwould collect things as they were able to and send them on to the Department. I believe the stuff ultimately did get to, in fact I know it ultimately got to the proper authorities of the tribunal. The tribunal eventually had its own investigators who took the lead in gathering information.

Q: But the human rights bureau did not have that mandate, not only there but also in other places? I mean, was there another bureau doing this for things coming out of Timor or Rwanda or Kosovo or all sorts of other little places? In the State Department, was there any sort of office that collected horror stories?

EICHER: Well, we did collect horror stories in the next office I was in, when I was director of the Office of Bilateral Affairs in DRL. That was really the office in the Department responsible for tracking human rights violations, or horror stories, if you want to call them that, all over the world. But we were doing it as part of our own mandate to promote human rights, not as an adjunct to war crimes tribunals. We would offer to share information with the tribunals, but the kind of reports we had were not generally the kinds that could be used effectively as evidence in prosecutions. We didn't generally track the names and whereabouts of witnesses, or conduct in-depth inquiries into specific incidents, or worry about chains of evidence. Our goal in collecting information was to document and publicize abuses, as the first step in being able to take action to stop abuses.

Our primary source of information was embassy reporting, of course. Embassies around the world are very good at producing good, reliable reports, including on human rights problems, particularly if they deal with particular events, say a massacre, or a race riot, or detentions of political activists. So the embassies would provide good information on those kinds of high-profile human rights issues, which you could also usually read about in the press. What we also did, however, was to deal a lot with the NGOs (non-governmental organizations), especially the human rights NGOs, so we would have a separate source of information coming in from them. They regarded DRL very much as "their people" within the State Department and tended not to have a lot of faith in the geographic bureaus to act on the human rights information they supplied. They would funnel the information to us and we would also always look at it very carefully. Some groups had more credibility than others. Groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch tended to do very professional work; you could trust the information they provided. There was also a lot of information coming in from local human rights NGOs based in various countries but we had to be more careful about them, since some of them might have a political agenda. Still, you got to know which ones you could generally count on. We met regularly with NGOs, both in formal groups and individually. We had a good relationship with them.

We would use all this information in preparing the Department's annual human rights reports. The way the human rights reports were prepared was for the embassy to prepare the first draft and send it to us in the human rights bureau. I guess I should just say, parenthetically, that when I moved from special assistant to be director of the Office of Bilateral Affairs (BA), at that point it was BA that was still ultimately responsible for the human rights reports. So I was very much involved in that process. The entire BA office was involved; it would kind of take us over for several weeks of the year. There was also a big "reports team," generally made up of Department retirees, that would come on board and do most of the day to day work and mechanics of putting the reports together. The more controversial the content of a report was, the more I would become involved.

In any event, we would look at the first drafts prepared by the embassies and compare them to the information we were getting all year long from NGOs, and if the embassy report was quite different from what we were hearing from NGOeither overall or on a particular issuwe would have a lot of tough questions for the embassy and we might insist on changes to their draft. We often made changes based on NGO information if we considered it sufficiently trustworthy.

Q: Did you see a little change in diplomacy with the advent of nongovernmental organizations, NGOs? I mean, this is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the State Department beginning to acknowledge this as being another arm of the diplomatic world and part of its outreach.

EICHER: Well, I wasn't there at the creation, I guess I should say. I started to encounter NGOs as a major part of my work while I was in Geneva, during my four years at the UN, where the NGOs were very, very active. In fact, the UN has something called "NGOs with consultative status with ECOSOC." ECOSOC is the UN Economic and Social Council and in the UN, human rights generally falls organizationally under ECOSOC. So, there were a lot of human rights NGOs in Geneva which already had consultative status and were already dealing with the UN. Not every NGO could get this status. For a long time, Human Rights Watch was excluded, due to opposition from the Cubans and some others, but we eventually got Human Rights Watch approved.

I found when I got to Geneva that the history of the U.S. relationship with NGOs had not always been very good and or very close. NGOs can sometimes seem like a pain. Most of them are strong-willed and outspoken. And, since they don't have a vote in the UN, a lot of American officials had been inclined to write them off as a waste of time. Human rights NGOs are crusaders, which are often very critical of the U.S. as well as of other governments, and which are always complaining about something. But you've got to realize that this is their role, their raison d'etre. They're there to point out what's wrong and to advocate improvements.

I was among those who worked hard to improve the U.S. relationship with NGOs. I have to say that Washington was actually an ally in this and encouraged it. In Geneva, and later in Washington, we worked very closely with NGOs and found it a very rewarding experience and very helpful to what we were doing. They were almost always strong allies on whatever human rights issue we wanted to pursue. They would often criticize us for not going as far on an issue as they would have wanted, but they were pleased that we were doing serious things on human rights. So, after working closely with NGOs in Geneva, when I got back to Washington, it seemed natural to do a lot of work with NGOs there, which was already an established practice in Washington. Shattuck himself met regularly with leaders of NGOs as an organized group, as well as with individual NGO leaders who would come in from time to time. They were quite important to what we were doing and they provided a real check during the human rights report process, to ensure that the information reported by embassies was complete and accurate. The human rights NGOs also provided a very important early warning system; very often we would hear first from NGO reports that there was this or that kind of problem in this or that country, even before the embassy reported on it. In some cases, we would ask an embassy to please look into this or that, based on information from NGOs.

Q: Did you have a list of NGOs to be listened to and NGOs to be dubious about?

EICHER: There was no specific list; certainly there was no "black list." As I said, there was a group of eight or ten of the major human rights NGOs with offices in Washington that we met with regularly, but it wasn't an exclusive list. In fact, they were self-organized to some extent and would have group meetings at their offices, which I often attended. So those were the big players. But, we listened to just about anyone who wanted to speak with us. As a result, I did spend a lot of time with dubious or questionable NGOs. There were some that we just gave less credibility to because the information they provided contradicted what we heard elsewhere or when we asked the embassy to check something, the embassy would carefully check and find that it wasn't true. There were also lots of NGOs that had a political ax to grind and you had to keep in mind that their information might be accurate, but it might also be a bit skewed or be a cover for a political agenda. You know, NGOs whose goal was to promote Kurdish independence, for example, or some of the Tibet NGOs or a whole range of other organizations. That's not to say that they weren't good and professional, but you just had to keep in mind what their political stance was and be a little more careful with the kinds of information you were getting from them.

Q: Was Cuba at all on our list or was this sort of a perennial problem and we had almost a cut and dried report?

EICHER: Cuba was always on our list and, in fact, there were always a certain number of accepted "bad guys" on our list. You would see a striking difference between the initial draft reports on countries like Cuba and Iraq and Iran and North Korea, compared to reports on countries where we were trying to have good relations. The initial drafts on Cuba and such would be extremely strong reports from the field. In most countries, our problem with human rights reports was that the fielthe embassiewas trying to water down or paper over the human rights problems in their countries, or try to explain them away. In Cuba and these other later, "axis of evil" countries, the reports that were coming in were very tough in the first place. If we didn't have an embassy somewhere, then it was the country desk that would put together the first draft of the report.

One of the things we had to be careful about was balance. We worked with a lot in the human rights bureau to try to ensure that when the same kind of human rights violation was taking place in different countries, it was characterized the same way in the human rights reports. Take political prisoners, for example. We couldn't say that there are political prisoners in Cuba and talk about how horrible that was and then take another country, say, Indonesia, where they also had political prisoners, but say "well, they do have political prisoners, but you have to understand the special circumstances and it's not really so bad because of this or that." We saw a lot of client-ism or "clientitis," as we called it. I mean, it was truly amazing, sitting in the DRL Office of Bilateral Affairs, some of the things you would see coming in from our embassies. China was one of the main, perennial examples of a truly terrible human rights situation, with a report coming in from our embassy explaining why it really wasn't so bad and you had to understand the context. We spent a lot of time in bureaucratic battles over what language to use to describe the situation in different countries. The battles that would get to my desk as office director were the ones that became very controversial and had risen to a higher level. I remember that I was involved in China, Indonesia and the Israeli occupied territories, among others.

Q: Let's take China. Obviously, anything good or bad you can say comes out of China. It's a vast country and it's got a dictatorial regime which is kind of breaking apart. You've got war lords and you've got corruption. I mean anything. How did you find the reporting from the embassy and then the reporting of other groups, and how did we reconcile that, while also considering American commercial interests?

EICHER: In the human rights reports we did pretty well. Ultimately, it was the human rights bureau that had the responsibility for the human rights reports. The assistant secretary had to sign off on the reports and that gave us a lot of leverage, much more than the bureau had on other policy issues. We could usually win the bureaucratic battles around the human rights reports by insisting we had to be consistent worldwide and insisting we had to be accurate. Only rarely would bureaucratic disputes rise to the assistant secretary level. It was a good feeling to win these bureaucratic battles. Overall, the annual human rights reports were really very good reports. I know they were sometimes criticized by NGOs as not being tough enough and that perhaps we might have been able to say things different ways, but overall I was very proud of the human rights reports we put out while I was in DRL. They won broad acceptance as perhaps the best, most reliable compendium of information on international human rights. They were a very valuable tool. Some people in the State Department and the embassies thought that it was time to dispense with the reports, that they were more trouble than they were worth, but I was a fan. The reports were a very valuable addition to U.S. policy. I believe that the first steps towards ending human rights violations is to acknowledge them and publicize them. The reports were critical in accomplishing these first steps.

Now, where we would run into bigger difficulties was not so much in the language of the reportdespite our bureaucratic battles about thabut in dealing with the policy consequences of the reports. From our perspective in the human rights bureau, if there were serious and persistent human rights violations in a country, this should affect U.S. policy towards that country. This led to another set of bureaucratic battles, which sometimes, or most often even, we would lose.

So, on China, for example, to get back to your question, the Department would finally agree to put out a very tough human rights report acknowledging very widespread and serious violations of human rights in China. Then, there would be very tough bureaucratic battles over what to do about it, if anything, and how much emphasis to attach to human rights, as compared to trade and other issues, when actually formulating policy. On China, this usually played out around two or three different issues. One of these issues that we've already talked about a lot was whether to sponsor a China resolution each year at the UN Commission on Human Rights. This was still an annual battle while I was in DRL/BA. We would usually win that one, but it was a pyrrhic victory, because the decision would be made so late and so reluctantly that we couldn't mount an effective campaign to get the resolution adopted. The other really big issue was MFN, most favored nation trade status. At that time, there would be a big battle in Congress every year about whether to renew China's most favored nation trading status with the Untied States. The battle centered to a large extent around human rights and whether we should be giving trade privileges to a major human rights violator. Despite the DRL perspective, the Department always came down on the side of renewing MFN, and even more, on wanting to give China permanent MFN status, without the need for an annual vote in the Congress. On a really big issue like that, trade trumped human rights. Eventually, China was given permanent MFN status despite its continuing, serious, persistent human rights problems. China was such a big issue that I had an officer in my office working full time on China; it was the only country for which I had full-time officer; most of the other officers were responsible for a full bureau.

But while China always seemed to be the biggest battle, there were lots of others. There were, in fact, a lot of laws that restricted giving military assistance, or even economic assistance, to countries that were human rights violators. Most of these laws had waivers that could be invoked to give assistance anyway, and we would get into bureaucratic battles about whether to invoke waivers if the countries in question were clearly serious human rights violators. There was one peculiar case that that sticks in my mind. There was a big bureaucratic fight, I remember, over a couple of the Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. There was a badly written, or badly thought-out, law that said we could not provide them with certain types of assistance unless the State Department certified that they were making progress on human rights. This was one of the only times I can remember having a policy disagreement with John Shattuck. I advised him very strongly not to sign the certification for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan because it seemed clear that they were not making progress on human rights. But he was under extremely heavy bureaucratic pressure to sign the certification anyway. As I recall, the import of this badly written law was that the United States would not be able to provide assistance for dismantling the remaining Soviet nuclear activities in the two countries unless we could certify that they were improving respect for human rights. It was a real catch-22, since if the countries are human rights violators, then you should be working even harder to make sure they don't have dangerous nuclear materials. I'll admit that I took a very hard-nosed stance on this issue, which was unpopular with the Central Asia offices and the arms control bureau, which could make a reasonable argument that from a policy perspective that we should sign the certifications so that we could still work on de-nuclearization. But I thought it would be a very bad precedent for DRL and for human rights policy to actually sign a certification of human rights progress where there was none, even in the interest of some other very worthy policy goal. It would have been far better to go back to Congress and get them to make a change to the bad law. But, the general view was that there wasn't time for this or it wasn't worth the effort since the Department could solve the problem itself by signing the certification and issuing a waiver. So, in the end, Shattuck ended up signing the certifications that they were making progress on human rights so the de-nuclearization programs could go forward, even though it was quite a stretch, at best, to say they were progressing on human rights. As we know, the human rights situation in the two countries continued to get worse and worse in subsequent years.

So, I guess that's a long answer to your question about how we balanced human rights against trade and other issues in the policy process. There were battles to be fought and decisions to be made in regard to different issues in different countries. We won some, but most often, we lost. The power structure in the Department was still very much with the geographic bureaus. The Department leadership was talking a very strong line about human rights being central to U.S. foreign policy, but when it came to the tough decisions, other issues tended to trump human rights. I was disappointed with Madeleine Albright as Secretary of State in this regard. When she was Permanent Representative to the UN, we could always count on her for very strong support on virtually every human rights issue. She was a strong supporter of the annual China resolution, for example, and she was one of the real movers behind the creation of the Bosnia war crimes tribunal. Even tactically, remember, she came down on the right side when I needed approval to press ahead on tabling a resolution to create a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. So I was very pleased when she became Secretary of State and had very high hopes that human rights issues would increasingly dominate U.S. policy. Instead, you could see a discernable change in her positions once she became Secretary. On China, for example, she no longer gave the solid support we had come to expect from her. I guess, maybe, that's a good example of "where you stand depends on where you sit." As secretary, she was either looking at the big picture in a different way, or she was under her own pressures that made her adopt different positions than she had previously taken. I could understand it, but I was disappointed.

Q: What about Israel? I mean the human rights thing? On the one hand, you've got the Israeli lobby which says that everything is sweetness and light and, on the other hand, the Israelis are actually doing all sorts of things that are pretty, pretty nasty when you think about it; grabbing territory and treating the Palestinians badly. This must've been a real battle, wasn't it?

EICHER: Well, somehow I don't remember Israel being as much of a battle as China and Indonesia and some of the others. I don't remember exactly how that report came out in the years I was there but I'm sure that it did list all of the different transgressions the Israelis were doing. With Israel, you had a lot of reasonable offsetting factors like a democracy that functions and a good legal system and courts that sometimes overruled nasty practices, so the overall report did not come across as negatively as many other countries. Still, I'm sure there were very sharp criticisms of Israeli practices in the reports we produced. But yes, there were also some differences over what language to use on Israel. As far as taking any punitive action against Israel because of its human rights practices, that was out of the question as far as U.S. policy went. Occasionally we might make a public statement critical of Israel because of something it dilike collective punishmentor we might try to lean on the Israelis to release someone, maybe, but it was pretty mild kind of stuff, when it happened at all. Israel was another good example of other policy considerations taking precedence over human rights. The same was true for Egypt, by the way.

Q: Well, I suppose also by the time you were there these things have been so honed in past bureaucratic battles that there was already an understanding among the different bureaus about what was generally acceptable to say and do.

EICHER: I think that's probably the case. As far as the human rights reports went, there were some things, some sorts of violations, that didn't really change much from year to year in various countries, and for those, we could use the previous year's language rather than having to go through a new bureaucratic struggle. In fact, I recalnot particularly with Israel but with many reportthat one of the problems we faced frequently was that a human rights issue might be just as bad in some country one year as it had been the previous year, say, torture or whatever the problem might have been, and yet there was a new ambassador, or new political officer responsible for the content of the report, and suddenly we'd get entirely new language coming from the embassy that would try to minimize the problem. In those kinds of cases, we could insist on going back to the previous year's language.

Q: Did you find yourself as these reports came in, looking over your shoulder at the United States and what was happening in our prisons? Because when you get right down to it, one could write pretty nasty reports about a lot of things that were happening in the United States. We're a big country and a lot of things happen here.

EICHER: Of course, we were much criticized around the world for reporting on what everybody else was doing wrong but ignoring our own problems. We had a few stock answers for that, although none of them were entirely satisfactory. The first answer was, of course, that the law requiring us to write the human rights reports did not apply to the U.S., so we had no authority to report on the U.S. Second, of course, the State Department didn't have the information to report on what was happening in the U.S.; we don't have embassies or consulates reporting what's happening in the U.S. or a "U.S. desk" at the State Department following developments here. Third, we'd say that the U.S. is the most open and most reported on country in the world; the U.S. and international media is constantly reporting on problems from prison conditions to racism, so it was not as if the U.S. was hiding information or as if there was some lack of information that would make it useful for us to produce a report on human rights in the U.S. They were all good points, but I don't think they satisfied our critics.

In fact, while I was in DRL, the situation started to change just a little bit, giving us another argument. What had happened was that the United States had finally ratified a couple of the big, international human rights treaties. The first of them had been signed during the Carter Administration but were not ratified for many years thereafter, until the first President Bush's administration. In particular, we finally ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which is probably the most important international human rights treaty. That treaty requires signatories to report to the United Nations every few years on their own human rights situations. So, the first U.S. report to the UN on compliance with the ICCPR came out while I was in the bureau. After that, when people said that the State Department didn't report on human rights violations in the U.S., we could reply that, you know, the State Department has no mandate to report on the United States, but we have reported to the United Nations and the report is publicly available.

Q: Who made the report?

EICHER: I believe the report was drafted mainly by the Justice Department and it was, as I recall, with State Department input coming largely from the Legal Adviser's office. It was a long and complex report, not very user-friendly. But it made a nice talking point for us to use when people complained that we didn't report on ourselves. The ICCPR was also important because it symbolized that the U.S. was finally getting on board with the international human rights treaty system. There are about ten of these important UN treaties, and the U.S. has been the only Western country reluctant to ratify them. We got a lot of criticism for our reluctance, which, frankly, was justified. The Congress just didn't like human rights treaties and the various administrations were unable or unwilling to put much political pressure behind getting them ratified. As I said, we finally ratified the ICCPR, and also the Convention against Genocide and the Convention against Torture. But several other important ones were not signed. For example, the U.S. never ratified the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which is the companion piece to the ICCPR. We also never ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and we are one of only two countries in the world that hasn't ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The attitude in the Congress has been very parochia"we don't need foreigners telling us how to raise our children" and other such nonsense, as if we were somehow threatened by human rights instead of being the champion of human rights. As a result, the U.S. is rather isolated in regard to international human rights treaties; we're well behind the curve. It makes it difficult for us to insist that others adhere to international standards when we haven't formally accepted them ourselves.

Q: How about Rwanda?

The Rwanda genocide happened while I was still in Geneva, before I got to DRL, as we discussed earlier. While I was in DRL it was still high on our agenda, but in terms of dealing with the aftermath. We were trying to set up the international war crimes court for Rwanda, along the same lines as the one already established for Bosnia. And, since only the top criminals would ever get before the international court, we were trying to help rebuild the justice system of Rwanda to deal with the others. There was a terrible situation on the ground, with thousands of Hutus crammed into tiny prisons where there was barely room to movliteralland no prospect of any of them going to trial since the justice system had been decimated. There were all kinds of other problems stemming from the genocide, as well. Armed Hutus had crossed into Congo and were causing havoc there. There was a big issue that war criminals were probably hiding out in the refugee camps in Congo and a lot of them were armed and conducting kind of a reign of terror over the other refugees.

Another thing I should mention that we were somewhat involved in was trying to apprehend war criminals from both Rwanda and Bosnia and turn them over to the court. We weren't actually doing the apprehending, of course, but we were involved in trying to put together lists, and encouraging other countries to cooperate when suspects turned up there, and making sure U.S. law enforcement knew of the State Department position on these people so they would cooperate if any of the suspects came to the U.S., which a couple did. We were involved in getting a few Rwandans turned over to the court.

On Bosnia, however, it was a sad situation. The worst of the war criminals were still running around more or less openly and the U.S. military was saying that it wasn't their job to arrest war criminals; they were afraid that going after Bosnian Serb leaders would unhinge the peace. We had a very different view from the Pentagon and were urging vigorous action. The White House, unfortunately, came down on the Pentagon's side. I don't remember the exact details, but the general policy was so restrictive that a war criminal would practically have to walk into an American military base before he would be arrested. Eventually this changed and the military adopted a more robust approach, but by that time the ringleaders had gone underground.

Back to Rwanda, we were also trying to get the United Nations to send a human rights mission into Rwanda, and we ultimately succeeded in pushing the new High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ayala-Lasso, to do this, partly by paying for much of it and partly by helping set up the process and recruit the people. This was the first ever UN human rights mission to a country, so it was groundbreaking. Since then it's become a common practice to have UN human rights missions in trouble spots. It was useful because you actually had monitors on the ground, who were reporting and watching what was going on and might, by their presence, deter some further outrages. But, by this time, the worst had already passed in Rwanda. In a way it was closing the barn door after the horse was gone.

Q: How about the Congo? Congo particularly at that time was in a real state of turmoil, wasn't it?

EICHER: It was, yes. I was in DRL when Laurent Kabila launched his war against Mobutu and eventually took over the Congo, in fact renamed it the Congo again, rather than Zaire. This was part of an extremely tumultuous time in Central Africa, with the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, and Rwandan troops running around inside Congo pursuing Hutu militias, and Kabila's revolt against Mobutu, plus a lot of unrest and revolt going on in Uganda and southern Sudan, as well. It was a mess on many fronts and there didn't seem to be a lot that people could do about it.

Interestingly, one of the things that sticks in my mind the most is being approached by an American woman whose husband had been kidnapped by Kabila when he was a rebel leader and held for ransom. Now Kabila was head of state and she was insisting that the United States should not be dealing with this person who she considered to be an outlaw. I guess the U.S. had even called him that at one point along the way. There wasn't much we could do from the human rights bureau to help her, other than giving her my sympathetic ear, which, in fact, turned out to be all she really wanted. As a head of state, Kabila would have had immunity against any U.S. action even if the U.S. had wanted to do something, which it did not.

Another of the big issues that took a lot of my time, I recall, was arms sales. It's interesting that human rights are taken into account when considering arms sales, as a result of congressional action. Usually, when the human rights bureau had some clout on an issue it was because the Congress had written some law saying specifically that the human rights bureau must have a say in it, or that the U.S. couldn't do this or that unless the human rights situation was satisfactory. Or, if there wasn't a legal provision, it was often included in the law's report language, so that the Department felt like it might get in trouble with the Congress if it ignored the human rights bureau. There was a legal provision that we should not sell military equipment to states which are gross human rights violators or systematic violators; I can't remember the exact language. There was also a provision that the president could waive the human rights restrictions for national security reasons. So, we spent a lot of time arguing with the other bureaus about whether we could sell F-16s, or whatever military equipment, to country X or Y.

Indonesia was one of the big countries that I spent a lot of time on, with the East Asia Bureau, discussing arms sales. There were some very serious human rights problems in Indonesia and we thought that under the circumstances, and the law, we should not be selling arms to the regime there. The East Asia bureau had the usual arguments about the country being a strategic ally. There was also pressure from the Pentagon and a couple of congressmen, I think, because there was also the potential for really big arms sales that they didn't want to lose. We finally came up with a compromise where we permitted the sale of naval vessell think they wanted to buy a couple of destroyerbut prohibited the sale of small arms and police equipment, including things like stun guns and handcuffs and electric prods. The idea was that they weren't going to use battleships to torture or oppress people, although you could still make the case that by selling major military equipment, you were upholding an oppressive regime. Nonetheless, we in the Human Rights Bureau found it to be a reasonable kind of compromise since it was one of those unusual instances where we prevailed in banning the sales of many types of equipment to a regime that might use it in questionable ways. The Congress also seemed to think we had come up with a good solution that more or less satisfied everyone.

We didn't win too many of the arms sales battles but we did have a few victories. In addition to Indonesia, I think we blocked some sales to Pakistan. We were regularly overridden, however, on countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabithose arms sales were so longstanding and broadly supported that I don't even remember there being any more than cursory discussion about them.

There was also a big Latin American arms sale issue that I was deeply involved in. There was a new amendment to some law; I can't remember for sure what law it was, but I think it was called the "Leahy amendment." In any event, this amendment said that the United States could not sell military equipment if it might be used by specific units of foreign militaries that had been involved in human rights violations. I can't remember if the amendment was applicable worldwide or just to Latin America, but the focus was certainly Latin America and, in particular, Colombia. Colombia was a very special and delicate problem because the government was facing a huge threat from rebels who were also narcotics traffickers, or associated with narcotics traffickers, supplying most of the cocaine going into the U.S. The U.S. was supporting the government against the rebels and the criminal drug cartels. But the Colombian government's record was far from clean. There were government-supported paramilitary groups, and some government troops, committing lots of horrendous human rights violations. The Leahy amendment tried to get at the problem of supporting the government but ending human rights violations by saying that even if we waived existing human rights provisions against selling arms to Colombia, we would still be prohibited from selling equipment that would be used by any unit of the Colombian army that had been involved in human rights violations. This was kind of a revolutionary proposal; it had never been tried before. So, we had to come up with a system under which the embassies would actually be required to monitor which U.S. weapons went to which units of a foreign military and to report on which specific units of a foreign army might have been involved in atrocities. This turned into quite a negotiation with both the Political Military Bureau (PM) and the Latin American Bureau. At first, PM claimed to be the action bureau and just stalled for a long time before producing a draft instruction that really didn't do any more than inform posts about the new legal provision. I finally had to come up with a new draft myself that instructed posts to put a new tracking system into place and to get certifications from the host country that our equipment would not go to specific units that we suspected of abuses, and to monitor what units were getting what equipment, and then tracking the behavior of units involved in the counter-insurgency. There was a lot of resistance, especially from PM, but with the Latin America Bureau's general support, that this would be too much work and that it wouldn't be practical, and so forth. In the end, however, this was one that the Human Rights Bureau won by virtue of saying "look, the Congress passed a law. We have to do it." So I worked on that and it was interesting. I felt a certain sense of accomplishment after the new procedures were put into place. I don't recall exactly how it turned out in practice in the short term, but I think it helped. If nothing else, the Colombians knew we were looking over their shoulders in much greater detail and there could be consequences unless they cleaned up their act. Over the longer term, as I understand, they really did get a grip on the paramilitaries and they have cleaned up their act.

Q: I was going to say, weapons are fungible, as they say.

EICHER: Well, you could say that, yes. A country could give the U.S. equipment to a "clean" unit and have them pass on their AK-47s to a unit we had blacklisted. Anyway, every little bit helped, we thought.

Beyond arms sales, we also got involved in a fair number of extradition cases. The U.S. ratified the UN Convention Against Torture in the early '90what a difference with the current Bush administration policieand one of the provisions of the Convention was that signatories are not allowed send somebody back to a country where they might be tortured. So, when there was a case where a country asked the U.S. to extradite someone, the case might come to my office for a determination of whether the individual to be extradited might face torture if we sent him back to the country asking for extradition. We looked at these cases and in some instances we advised that people should not be sent back to country X or Y because we feared that there was, in fact, a legitimate chance that they would be tortured when they got there, based on that country's past record. In other cases, we accepted assurances from the host government that the person would not be tortured and, in some of those cases, we asked our embassy to follow up from time to time, to actually try to meet the person to ascertain that in fact, he had not been tortured after he got there. As far as I can recall, however, I don't think there was any systematic procedure for ensuring that we were consulted on extraditions; I think it was ad hoc and may have depended on how good a lawyer the accused person had.

We occasionally also got involved in asylum cases. There was a separate Office of Asylum within DRL that handled most asylum requests but when a case got big and controversial, it would also come to Bilateral Affairs for our judgment on whether the situation in some country was such that an asylum request might be valid. We would provide our opinions to the asylum court judges, who would make the decisions in individual cases.

There were a number of other human rights issues that came up in the time that I was in DRL as well. Human rights and the environment was always a controversial issue within the Department. A lot of NGOs were advocating a "right to a healthy environment." The State Department legal office was usually vehemently against recognizing any new rights and sometimes even seemed to want to minimize existing rights; their goal was often to try to ensure that the U.S. didn't get entangled in anything that would result in new legal obligations for the U.S. that might be a problem at some point in the future. I should caveat that because often these issues were so arcane that only a single lawyer in the Legal Adviser's Office was involved, a single lawyer could cause lots of obstructions. Most of the lawyers in the office were very strong advocates of human rights and were a pleasure to work with. On the environment, however, the legal office was reluctant for us to do anything. I formed a little working group that included DRL, the legal adviser's office and the environment bureau, and were able to hammer out a policy that put the U.S. more or less on the right side of the issue, even while keeping the lawyers satisfied.

Freedom of religion was also becoming a huge issue. I was not in charge of that one, but I was part of DRL's working group and was much involved in trying to raise the profile of problems of persecution on the basis of religion. I think this issue was driven at first by Congressional interest, which was sparked by church groups. The bureau organized a panel of experts on freedom of religion, including a number of very prominent American clerics from different denominations. DRL also put out the first report on religious persecution while I was there and, of course, I had to get involved in helping with that, even though I was not the lead. This continued to grow after I left DRL and now there's a much bigger, more structured, annual report on religious freedom, as well as a special ambassador on religious freedom.

Another issue that was started to emerge as a big human rights issue while I was in DRL was female genital mutilation. This had been an issue for a long time, of course, but it wasn't one that got a lot of publicity or that the U.S. previously had an official position on.

Q: This was done particularly in Africa. I ran across it a bit in the Persian Gulf area. I'm not sure it's still an issue there but it had been at one time.

EICHER: It was a big issue in Africa and the Middle East and one that the United States was really starting to get active on. It was not a religious issue, fortunately, but a cultural and traditional practice, which made it easier to work on, although it was still a sensitive subject in many countries. We started to publicize the issue and to be critical of countries where it was a common practice, trying to encourage them both through shame and through public health programs to adopt policies which would try to put an end to this. Women's rights, in general, in fact, were quite a big issue while I was in DRL. Among my other hats, I was head of the Bureau's working group on human rights of women. We tried to find various ways to advance women's rights. In fact, I think the very first thing I did when I got to the Bureau was immediately to run off to Beijing to attend the 1995 UN World Conference on Women.

Q: Hillary Clinton went to that.

EICHER: Hillary Clinton went to that, indeed. She was the leader of the U.S. delegation and she made quite a splash and a very good impression with her work there. She was seen as a real hero by most of the women in attendance. I was working primarily with Geraldine Ferraro, who was one of the deputy leaders of the American delegation. She's the one who asked me to join the delegation. You might recall that I had worked as her deputy in Geneva, when she was ambassador to the Human Rights Commission. So, I spent two or three weeks in Beijing, in one of these massive multilateral negotiations, trying to put together the Beijing Declaration and Program of Action.

Q: Can you explain your impression, what were some of the issues, how were the Chinese as the hosts and some of the other delegations? How did this whole thing work?

EICHER: For me it was very familiar territory. It was a big UN conference, not so different from the World Conference on Human Rights, which I had participated in a couple years earlier in Vienna. In fact, there were a lot of the same issues and a lot of the same people were there, so I felt very much at home. We were working towards a similar goal, to try to get an international consensus on a single document with a broad set of issues. This time, of course, the document was on women rather than on human rightthe themes were "equality, development and peace" but lots of the issues were really human rights issues. By the time we got to Beijing, there was already a pretty good outline or draft of the program of action, which ran on for two hundred or so pages. It set out all kinds of things that countries, NGOs, and international organizations ought to do in a whole range of fields to promote a better life for women. It covered health issues, economic development, education, physical protection, and a lot of other issues, including women's rights. Women's empowerment was a big theme.

Unlike the World Conference on Human Rights, where the preparatory phase took place in Geneva and I was involved in the negotiations from the very beginning of the preparations until the end of the conference, on the women's conference I really came in at the tail end of the negotiations, which had been held in New York. The Beijing conference was the final phase, where the delegations had to wrap up all the details and reach agreement on the most controversial issues, those on which there had not been consensus yet. What I personally ended up spending most of my time on in Beijing was what came to be called the "Beijing Declaration." The pre-Beijing negotiations had developed this very nice, lengthy program of actiowhich still had a number of controversial points but which was in reasonable shapbut nobody had done anything about a preamble or a lead-in document. I was assigned to be the negotiator for the preamble, which would say that "we, the representatives of all countries in the world, are gathered in Beijing with the following goals and we want to ensure X, Y, and Z for women everywhere." This would be the "Beijing Declaration," which would be a general statement of goals and principles, just a couple of pages long. The outcome of the conferencthe document adopted therwas called the "Beijing Declaration and Program of Action," being a combination of the document I worked on and the much longer program of action I mentioned before.

Q: In many ways the Declaration is the equivalent to the executive summary and really, the only thing that almost anybody will ever read?

EICHER: Well, in a sense that's right, although the long Beijing document was, in fact, read by many, many people and even became sort of the Bible for the international women's movement for the next several years. But the casual reader might not get any further than the Declaration. It was sort of a microcosm of all the big issues that were included in the program of action, but in more general terms. And since we had to use much reduced language, it made for a new negotiation on many of the key points as well as some extraneous ones, as each delegation tried to get its favorite political points included. There was even some language on arms control and disarmament included.

Since the Declaration was really an important part of the outcome, I was surprised that it seemed to be an afterthought and that no one had started working on a draft before we actually assembled in Beijing. I was also surprised that with such a big, high-powered delegation, I was the one who ended up doing most of the Declaration. With my human rights background, I spent most my time trying to get human rights clauses into it. With the help of a lot of the Europeans and others, the Beijing Declaration was very heavily human rights-focused, with many paragraphs dealing with the rights of women. So we found that to be a very nice victory. On the whole, the Declaration was pretty good, as were the results of the conference in general. Although there were a lot of controversial issues, all in all the delegations wanted to do the same kinds of things and the negotiations in general were not nearly as hard fought as at other international negotiations I've been involved in.

Q: What were the basic issues you had to deal with and who were the prime either opponents or obstructionists?

EICHER: In my negotiation, the main issues that seemed to spark controversy were really various human rights issues. Some of the countries with big human rights problems wanted to avoid human rights issues to the extent possible, and that made me and like-minded delegations even more determined to include as much as possible. I found myself in a very strong negotiating position because just a couple of years before, at the World Conference on Human Rights, these countries had agreed to a lot of principles and language that they didn't like very much and it became very awkward for them to try to say two years later that "well, in the context of women, we really don't believe these things anymore." So, overall, it worked pretty well on the human rights front. We also had to do a reprise on a number of different issues. As I said, the Declaration was wide-ranging and touched on a lot of issues, from poverty eradication to arms control, but most of the language was pretty bland. At the very end, a couple of the members of the U.S. delegation decided they didn't like the language on environment and economic growth, which was really quite innocuous but didn't include some catch phrase they would have liked. Since the language in question had already been adopted, this led to a long negotiation on a new, additional paragraph in which many delegations tried once again to include all of their favorite issues. So, if you ever look at the Declaration, you'll see that one of the last paragraphs is very long and convoluted compared to the rest of the document, and includes all kinds of issues that don't fit neatly together, and is a bit out of sync with the rest of the Declaration.

Q: Was birth-control an issue?

EICHER: Birth control was an issue. It was not really my issue, so I was not involved in the negotiations on that and can't tell you much about how they went. I do know that "women's reproductive rights," as the issue was referred to, was a big, controversial issue and there were a lot of people spending a lot of time negotiating on it. This being the Clinton Administration, we didn't have to worry about the so-called "Mexico City Policy" from the Regan administration. The United States was taking a progressive view on women's reproductive rights but a lot of countries were not. It made for a strange set of alliances, since most of the Latin American countries, which usually side with us on human rights issues at these big conferences, are very Catholic and had positions that were strongly anti-abortion. China, on the other hand, which is usually against us on human rights issues, is very pro-abortion. So sometimes it was strange bedfellows. But, eventually they came up with some compromise language that everybody could accept. I cannot recall exactly what it was. In the Declaration, which I was working on, we did work out some language about the right of women to control their own fertility, which was positive, but it was very brief and didn't specifically mention abortion.

Q: How about the trafficking of women? We talked about this before but was this an issue?

EICHER: It was an issue and it did come up. But, I think this was one of those issues where everybody was basically in agreement that it is a problem and we need to try to do something about it. So, it wasn't an issue of controversy, as far as I can recall.

Q: Well, you know, I guess it would be a little hard to say "free trade" or something like that.

EICHER: Yes. One issue that was very controversial, which had an interesting outcome was the question of inheritance rights for women. This got to be a big issue with the Islamic countries because Islamic law, sharia, sets out very specifically what women are entitled to inherit and it's not equal to what men get. So the Islamic countries were opposed to the right to inherit equally. Geraldine Ferraro was the one who was working on this issue for us and I remember her describing the difficulties in finding a compromise. Eventually, the solution worked out in the conference document approved women's "equal right to inherit" rather than their "right to inherit equally." The upshot was that everybody has an equal right to inherit, whether they're men or women, but they don't necessarily get to inherit the same amount. The U.S. delegation accepted this, as everyone else did. In fact, in a way it does reflect U.S. practice. Gerry Ferraro explained that "look, you know, if I want to leave all of my wealth to my son or leave it all to my daughter that should be my choice. I shouldn't be forced by some international standard to divide things up equally if I don't want to. They should all have an equal right to inherit, but that doesn't mean they should always inherit equally."

Another big issue was the idea of "cultural relativism" or "particularities," as it was called in the human rights context, which had been one of the most difficult issues at the Vienna conference a couple of years before. The argument on this was over how much you had to take into account a country's cultural traditions and historical background in the context of human rights or women's rights. That is, if a country doesn't have a Western-type democratic tradition, do the same "Western" standards apply to it? Or, is it OK to treat women differently in countries with a long tradition of treating women differently? In fact, we had already pretty much won that battle in Vienna at the World Conference on Human Rights, but we had to fight it again in Beijing. We ended up with even slightly better language than we had in Vienna. Everybody ultimately agreed again that yes, every country's history and cultural traditions were important, but regardless of what their traditions may be, all countries are obliged to accept and to adhere to a common set of international standards on human rights and women's rights.

Q: Did you get any feel for the performance of Hillary Clinton, seeing as now she's in a prime position to be the Democratic candidate in the 2008 elections? We don't know how that will come out as we talk, but how was her work there?

EICHER: She was very popular. She gave her keynote address and it was standing room only. She brought the house down. Generally people don't listen to speeches at these conferences, but everyone was very intent on hers. People were applauding and giving standing ovations. She was extremely impressive as the public face of the delegation. She was not there the entire time. It was a long conference, as I said, two or three weeks. This included a pre-conference negotiating week. I think she was there for a week or less and I don't recall her being involved in the negotiations at all. But everyone wanted to meet her and I'm sure she used her meetings to press for the U.S. positions on various issues.

The U.S. slogan for the conference was "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights." We worked hard to get that into the Declaration as well, to get that phrase in. I guess that was an example of what I mentioned before, about every delegation trying to get their favorite language into the Declaration. We ran into a lot of resistance from people who said this is just a slogan and doesn't really mean anything. Those were mainly the delegations who always oppose the U.S. on everything. We ended up getting half of it in but I can't remember whether it was women's rights are human rights or the other way around, but one of them is actually in the Declaration.

Hillary was regarded as one of the heroes of the conference, a very strong U.S. voice to try to ensure that the right things came out. On a day to day basis, the delegation was led primarily by Donna Shalala, who was the secretary for health and human services at the time, and by Tim Wirth, who was the undersecretary of state for global affairs. Tim was a very good guy and did much of the day to day management and coordination of the delegation. Madeleine Albright was also there for at least part of the conference; she was still UN ambassador at the time. It was a huge American delegation. I think every woman in the United States wanted to get on to it. There must've been eighty or a hundred people on the delegation. Most were private individuals, some of whom seemed just to be along for the ride. Those of us from the State Department were definitely in the minority. We felt like we did most of the work, of course, and all of the reporting. I think there were three or four of us who traded off doing the daily reporting cables.

Q: And the idea of China and women's rights and all the leaders. Did you find yourself in a position of trying to herd a passel of kittens or something or that wasn't your job?

EICHER: Fortunately, that wasn't my job, as it had been when big delegations came to Geneva. In fact, and to the credit of who ever put the Beijing delegation together, most of them were very good, solid people, even though very few had any background in international negotiations. A lot of them weren't even very interested in the negotiations and although some were very good, others were more what we might have called "women's rights tourists," who were really there for the ride and the experience, and who didn't contribute much, as far as I could see.

There was a huge "NGO forum" attached to the conference, which the Chinese had to set up. This was a requirement for any UN international conference because the UN tries to be NGO-friendly and a number of NGOs do have official, consultative status with the UN. There were thousands of NGO participants there, from hundreds of women's groups and other interested groups from all over the world. At past conferences, like in Vienna, the NGO forum was set up on the same premises where the governments were meeting, or nearby. Beijing was very controversial because the Chinese set up the NGO conference not contiguous with the main conference but in a separate town in the suburbs. The Chinese said this was for logistical reasons, to give a better, more spacious and more open venue, but most of the NGO participants viewed it as an effort to sideline the NGOs in an out-of-the-way place where they would be easier to control, less likely to influence the government delegations, less likely to be able to do anything disruptive, and less likely to come into contact with everyday Chinese. So, they set up this big sort of NGO village out in Wairu, a suburb that was, I don't know, maybe twenty or thirty miles, an hour's bus trip, away from the conference. Most of the so-called "public delegates" on the U.S. delegatiothat is, the delegates who were not full-time employees of the State Department or other U.S. government agenciewanted and liked to spend their time out in Wairu, hobnobbing and networking with the NGOs, rather than asking to be in the nitty-gritty of the negotiations that were taking place at the conference site. I visited Wairu once or twice and it was a very interesting and actually nicely set up, administratively. There was a very active, very large group of organizations out there promoting all their various causes, holding seminars and handing out literature. But it was very strange because you had all these hundreds of organizations promoting their causes to each other, instead of promoting them to the delegates who were actually writing the conference documents and doing the negotiations. They were so isolated. They didn't seem to me to have much influence on the negotiations. I don't recall any NGOs being involved in the declaration negotiations in Beijing. A lot of them had clearly done a lot of work during the preparatory phases, since many of their issues were already incorporated in the draft program of action that we started with when we got to Beijing. Some of the biggest, most serious ones were very unhappy at being stuck in Wairu. But, in general, Wairu seemed to me to be more of a huge, happy convention, with lots of like-minded people celebrating women's empowerment, with sort of a party atmosphere.

Q: What was your impression of how the Chinese handled this whole thing?

EICHER: They were very, very intent on having a successful outcome to the conference and being seen as good hosts, so they were positive; they were flexible. Everybody was a little bit irritated about this Wairu business for the NGOs but eventually the internationals more or less rolled over on that and stopped complaining about it. With that major exception, I think the Chinese bent over backwards not to be obstructionist on any kind of substantive issue. I don't remember them taking an active part in the negotiations, although their delegates were there in force. Actually, it was refreshing to see the Chinese being cooperative instead of obstructionist. They were desperate to have a successful conference, at which everybody agreed to something; that seemed to be far more important to them than exactly what was agreed.

Q: As a male, did you feel that you were a bit of a fish out of water? I'm not sure that's the right simile but, anyway, were there proponents saying by God, only women should write this document on women or something like that? Was that an issue or not?

EICHER: No, that wasn't an issue. It certainly was overwhelmingly women who were at the conference, which is not surprising, I suppose. In fact, I remember walking in the first day of the conference with Gerry Ferraro and her saying something like, "holy shit, look at the number of women!" So, for people like Gerry who had spent much of their lives blazing trails as the first woman in this or that, it was quite striking to see a UN conference so dominated by women. But, there were enough men there that you didn't feel really out of place. In fact, as I said, it was also a lot of the same people who had been negotiating with me at the World Conference on Human Rights, so I found a lot of friends or colleagues from various countries, both men and women. In fact, I think a number of women were probably disappointed that there weren't more men there. Among women activists, there was a realization that you're not going to be effective promoting women's empowerment or women's rights by working only with women. You also have to get the men to buy into the concepts for it to be a really successful effort. So I didn't find any problem in that sense.

Q: Was there sort of an international team that you could join up with, sort of a human rights team, I'm thinking maybe the British or the Scandinavians, or what have you, a group that sort of represented a core of the same basic interests that could work as a team?

EICHER: Absolutely. In fact, since this was a UN conference, there was the same kind of geographical breakdowns, or subgroups, that I was so familiar with from Geneva. There was a so-called WEOG, the Western Europeans and others group, which would meet regularly to coordinate positions for the conference.

Q: Who were the "OGs"?

EICHER: The "others," the OGs if you want, are the United States and Canada, plus Australia, New Zealand and Japan. There was a little bit of a twist in Beijing, since the EU had gotten its act a little more together since the World Conference on Human Rights. By the time of the Beijing conference, the Europeans were spending most of their time coordinating among themselves, leaving out the rest of us non-Europeans. In fact, we had another very interesting little group that used to get together regularly in Beijing to coordinate positions. It was called JUSCANZ (pronounced "juice cans"), which are the initials of the countries, Japan, U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This was basically the "leftovers" of the WEOG. Japan was officially part of the Asian group, but it tended to have positions in common with the WEOG, so it sat informally in WEOG meetings, as well as in JUSCANZ. So we met with the JUSCANZ quite regularly to share information, coordinate positions and share some of the work.

In general, the dynamics of the conference were also interesting. I've mentioned the strange alliances on the abortion issue. In Beijing, the African countries, which were mainly represented by prominent women from their capitals who may or may not have had much influence with their governments back home, tended to take very activist, progressive points of view. This was a real contrast to what we usually found from the Africans in human rights negotiations. The African women were tremendous allies on almost every issue. It made us think they were freelancing, that had there been a regular, government delegation, then the countries' positions would have been much different. But we were very happy to work with them.

On the other hand, the Latin American delegations, the Latin American women, were much tougher to deal with on a number of issues, primarily because of their conservative, Catholic background on reproductive rights. In other negotiations we had usually counted on the Latins to be our allies and would have a hard time with the Africans. So it was an interesting, different dynamic.

When I got back to Washington, one of the things I tried to do out of the Human Rights Bureau, in my capacity as head of the Bureau's working group on human rights of women, was to try to make sure that there was some kind of effective follow up to the conference. We were able to get the Secretary to send a cable to all diplomatic posts instructing them to follow up with their host country and listing a number of different issues that we felt they ought to pay special attention to and work on, especially with the people who had been members of the Beijing delegations. We hoped we could start to build a new dynamic at American embassies that women's empowerment issues, such as the ones we worked on at Beijing, were issues that were appropriate and worthy for attention by American embassies. All this was part of what we called "mainstreaming" women's issues into foreign policy. As far as I could tell, most posts didn't take it too seriously at first. A year later, on the anniversary of the conference, I did another, all-diplomatic-posts instruction, asking our embassies to follow up on how well their host countries were doing in implementing their Beijing commitments. So, we were starting to build a new mentality in the State Department as well as around the world.

Q: Were these instructions basically asking our embassies to work with the NGOs within the countries?

EICHER: Not just the NGOs, but even more so with the governments. We actually sent each embassy a list of their country's delegation members, in case they didn't have it, including both government people and NGOs. We asked the embassies to make contact with these people and to try to work with them to build on the momentum created at Beijing. We would ask, for example, that the embassy call on the minister of social affairs or whoever was in the country's delegation at Beijing, and remind her or him that they had approved this big plan of action, so what was being done to implement it? So that was a good process. Again, we had no easy way of telling what kind of specific concrete actions were being taken in specific countries by either the host governments or by our embassies. Reporting was very sporadic. I don't believe most of our embassies had sufficiently accepted that women's empowerment or women's rights should be a substantial issue of U.S. foreign policy. But at least we were making a start in that direction.

Q: Well, of course one looks at diplomacy. It's a cumulative effect. I mean, people slaving away at things like human rights and, well, all sorts of things. And, at a certain point, these issues get absorbed into the ethos of things, both of the countries we're working on and our own, too. We look at things quite differently over time. The same way that today if I see somebody smoking, I find myself raising my eyebrows, whereas I used to smoke myself. Countries change.

EICHER: Well, I think that's right. I hope we were making a contribution and helping to change things. At a minimum, for some people, we were bringing a lot of issues to their attention for the first time and for others we were reinforcing something that they already knew. I mentioned the worldwide instructions from the secretary of state that I drafted. I was quite proud of initiating that idea and doing that. Even if it didn't have any immediate impact on U.S. foreign policy, it did lay the groundwork that these are important issues, things that U.S. embassies should be trying to work on. If any embassy wanted to spend time and resources on it, they no longer had to explain or justify why; they had an instruction telling them it was U.S. policy.

Q: Tell me about your diplomatic skills. You know, these international organizations are all very nice, but the real diplomacy is from one bureau to another. How did you find dealing with particularly the geographic bureaus? Did you have any difficult bureaus, any good bureaus? Were there any problems?

EICHER: I think it was pretty tough all around. The geographic bureaus tended to be very protective of their territory and their policies. The functional bureaus in general, and the Human Rights Bureau in particular, I think, were seen not only as backwaters but as interlopers. From the perspective of the geographic bureaus, we never sufficiently understood the strategic context or the local circumstances in whatever country we were dealing with, even if it was a country we had visited or served in ourselves. They thought that the functional bureaus, especially human rights, never took broader U.S. interests into account and so forth and so on. There were a lot of bureaucratic battles, several of which I already described to you, occasionally even resulting in a so-called "split memo." These were decision memos that would have to go up to the under secretary for political affairs, or even to the secretary of state, to make the final decision when there was a dispute among bureaus on whether we should adopt one policy course or another. The human rights bureau usually lost on these. Just the fact that the memos went to "P," the undersecretary for political affairs, who was in charge of the geographic bureaus, rather than to "G," the undersecretary for global affairs, who was in charge of the functional bureaus, tells you a bit about where the power lay.

One of the many battles we had, the annual dragged out, knuckles bared fight on the China resolution at the UN Human Rights Commission was probably the worst. I was carrying a lot of the water for the Human Rights Bureau on this, along with John Shattuck, certainly, and others. It was an extremely frustrating effort. Ultimately, we did win this one every year I was there, at least in the sense that we did co-sponsor a China resolution each year at the Commission. But the China desk, through its bureaucratic maneuvering, was able to ensure that we did not do it effectively or vigorously enough. The position which was ultimately adopted by the U.S. just about every year was that "we'll see how the situation is at the time the Commission meets and make our decision when the time comes." This has a certain logic in the sense that you can hold the threat over the Chinese and that perhaps they'll come up with some prisoner releases or something in exchange for us dropping the resolution. But, in terms of actually getting a resolution adopted, if you wait until the Human Rights Commission starts to decide whether you want to do a resolution on China, you've missed six months of trying to build political support for a resolution. The practical result was that since China never did enough, we had our embassies around the world rushing in at the last moment saying, "Oh, we just decided that the situation is still bad in China and you should vote for a resolution." Meanwhile, the Chinese had been spending the entire year with high-level delegations to every member of the Human Rights Commission lobbying against a resolution. So it was a very poor, very frustrating bureaucratic process indeed. Although this was one of the bureaucratic battles we won, it was a hollow victory in the sense that while we sponsored a resolution, we never launched an effective campaign to get one adopted.

Q: Did you see in the time you were there any change in the Chinese attitude toward human rights?

EICHER: Very little. There was a progression going on in China. You couldn't deny that the country was changing, and changing in a positive way. Certainly there was more individual freedom in some ways as the Chinese political system became less totalitarian. But this was individual freedom in the social sense more than the political sense. As long as people refrained from criticizing the political system and stayed out of politics, as long as they avoided criticizing the government, as long as they didn't ask to be in a labor union that was independent, as long as they were satisfied with state-controlled churches, as long as they didn't openly advocate anything that was against government policy, then yes, they were freer to choose what job they wanted to have or where they wanted to live. These were important things, even though they were limited. China even started experimenting with village elections for the first time, which had the potential to become something very significant, although they had not yet become very widespread. So, yes, there were some changes and some positive things going on. It was really in terms of political rights, like freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and political prisoners that things were still going badly. China still had a huge, pervasive, system of political detention, "reeducation through labor" camps, where tens of thousands of people every year would be sentenced for terms lasting years, without any kind of a trial, just an administrative procedure. So there was change and some hopeful signs, yes, but still really enormous human rights problems.

One of the things I did while I was in DRL was a human rights mission to China. I went to Beijing again, along with one of the deputy assistant secretaries for the Asia Bureau, Jeff Bader, and the head of Chinese affairs in the National Security Council, whose name I'm afraid I can't remember. We went a few weeks before the Human Rights Commission, to talk with the Chinese to see if we could get them to agree to do a few positive things in exchange for us not sponsoring a resolution against them. This was a very interesting trip out there, as well as a very grueling trip. We flew out, spent two days on the talks and then turned around and flew back. We had good, serious talks. We were pushing for the release of specific political prisoners, and pushing them to sign and ratify some of the major human rights treaties. We also wanted China to open its prisons to visits by the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and to let up on persecution of Christians. I can't remember exactly what else was on the agenda; there were a couple of other items but those were the biggest ones. We spent two days talking with the Chinese about these things. They occasionally tried to say these were internal affairs, but we could beat them back from that. Occasionally, they would point out that the U.S. also had serious problems of human rights, which we didn't try to deny. In the end, we did not come away from our meetings with any kind of agreement. Eventually, as before every meeting of Human Rights Commission, they did release a couple of prisoners. But, they never were willing to do what we regarded as the bare minimum to not sponsor a resolution. Still, releasing a few prisoners did get them some votes from other delegations, so they were achieving their objective.

Q: What about Congress? Did you have sort of fire-breathing liberals on one side and Neanderthal, right wing Republicans on the other side? I mean, going after you and the human rights bureau? How did you find Congress?

EICHER: Congress was generally a big ally of the human rights bureau.

Q: They started it. I mean, people think Carter did, but it was actually Congress that kicked the human rights report off.

EICHER: And they still were big supporters when I was in DRL. To the extent we had leverage within the State Department, it tended to be because Congress had legislated or declared that human rightand DRL in particulahad to be taken into account and had to be part of the policy process. We did have a number of congressmen who were real allies and we had the general sympathy of practically everybody in Congress, as far as I can recall. There was a Congressional Human Rights Caucus that we dealt with fairly regularly. Tom Lantos, I believe, was the chairman at the time.

Q: He was an Auschwitz survivor of the concentration camps and a congressman from California.

EICHER: That's right, and he was very helpful on many issues. Interestingly, some of the very right wing Republican members of Congress were very libertarian and very supportive of human rights. Congressman Chris Smith, who is one of the most conservative members of Congress, was one of the most active proponents of human rights.

Q: He's from where?

EICHER: He's a Republican from New Jersey. We could usually count on him to support us on big human rights issues. I remember him at the Beijing Conference complaining that we weren't taking tough enough positions on this or that. Occasionally, say on the abortion issue, we would disagree, but on most basic human rights and civil liberties issues, many right wing Republicans tend to be very strong supporters of individual rights and liberties, both at home and abroad. In fact, at the moment, with what's going on in the United Stateall the wire tapping and detention without trial'm very disturbed because some of them don't seem to be standing up in the way they traditionally have for individual freedoms here in our own country.

Congressman Wolf of Virginia, another Republican, was another strong supporter. He was very active on human rights issues. He was very supportive in Congress. I didn't deal a lot of with Congress myself but I did go up a few times to speak with congressmen or staffers about particular issues or particular countries. Arms sales to Indonesia was one of the issues, I remember. The Indonesia office director was going to brief somebody on the Hill, who insisted somebody from the human rights bureau also come along and join the briefing so that they could be sure and get a balanced view. Of course, it wasn't as if I was going to start a debate with my colleague from the desk right there in the congressman's office; we ironed out our position carefully in advance. But it was an indication of how much Congress did support our efforts on human rights.

Congress even started to appropriate money for DRL, making it a "money bureau" in a very small way. There was a small fund, a few million dollars maybe, for human rights projects, which was controlled by the bureau. Congress also earmarked money for specific human rights causes, like the United Nations Fund for Victims of Torture. So, Congress was a very positive force all around on human rights.

Q: I imagine with the Clinton White House that you felt basic support, that this was an administration that had quite a bit of positive feelings toward human rights, didn't it?

EICHER: We did. Occasionally, we would be disappointed. I was talking about China, for example, where we never took quite a tough enough stance, from our point of view. It was during the Clinton administration that China was granted permanent most-favored-nation trade status. On the issue of apprehending war criminals in Bosnia, I think I've already mentioned that the administration sided with the Pentagon in terms of not insisting on a robust effort to make arrests. The administration was also quite negative on the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC). I had left the bureau before the real negotiations to create an ICC began, but the U.S. did not buy onto the agreement that was hammered out at an international negotiation in Rome. Clinton finally signed the ICC agreement in the waning days of his presidency, but he made no effort to get it ratified by Congress. The Bush administration came in and disavowed his signature. So, while Clinton was favorably disposed toward promoting human rights issues, it was not all positive; other issues often trumped human rights. In fact, there was not that much difference, really, between the first President Bush and Clinton on human rights. Both were strong supporters, as previous presidents had been. It's only under the current Bush administration that things seem really to have changed. And even the current administration has talked big about the importance of democracy and has launched a couple of initiatives on it, which haven't gotten very far, perhaps because its own record on human rights has been so bad.

I can't recall if I mentioned in particular Madeleine Albright and her role on human rights. She was still ambassador to the United Nations at the time I started in DRL and was playing a positive role. During the first year or so that I was in DRL, while she was still UN ambassador, she was an extremely strong proponent of human rights and somebody who we could count on in every bureaucratic battle. In fact, we started to make it a practice to include USUN in "split memos," as if it were a bureau, because we could always count on Madeleine Albright to sign on to our side of whatever the dispute might be. Much to my disappointment, when she became secretary, she tended to take the other side and rule against us. I was rather disappointed in Madeleine. I was so excited when she became secretary because I hoped we would have the secretary agreeing with us on all these things, but it didn't happen.

Q: Can you think of any specific things where she didn't agree with you, as secretary of state didn't support you?

EICHER: The China resolution is the best example. She was a solid supporter when she was in New York. But, once she was secretary, she had to take into account trade issues, and security, and a hundred other things that she might not have had to take into account as UN ambassador. We could certainly understand when she ruled against us, but it was a disappointment. We weren't really thinking that U.S. policy would totally change under a new secretary, but we were disappointed at what seemed to be a flip-flop, as if she were no longer taking a position of principle.

Q: Did you have any problems? By this time you were a relatively senior officer dealing with junior officers who'd come in pissing vinegar and who may have tended to discount other priorities, like getting rid of missiles in Uzbekistan or the overall problem of trade and gradual development in China and all that. Did you have to have seminars with junior officers to bring them down to reality?

EICHER: Not so much. We had a lot of junior officers. Most of the desk officers in the human rights bureau tended to be junior, very often in their first assignment in the Department. We had to work with them and do a lot of mentoring and explaining how the Department worked. They usually needed guidance on what they should insist on, what they couldn't insist on, and when they had to buck something up to the next level rather than either cave in or try to settle it themselves. We did instruct them not to start wars with the geographic bureaus, which, I guess, had been a problem from time to time in the past. On the other hand, a few of them were people who really wanted to be on the geographic desks instead of in DRL and some were looking to build good relations with the geographic bureaus with a view to their next assignments. So, in some cases you had to counsel them to be tougher, rather than worrying that they would be too tough. I didn't have a real problem with most of my junior officers. Most of them were responsible, young people who believed in what they were doing and thought they were having a positive influence on policy. I think they were. It didn't take them long to understand the balance of power in the Department. They seemed pleased enough if we would back them up, which we normally did, of course. The general feeling was that as long as you fought the battles well, you didn't have to win them all in order to feel like you were doing something constructive.

Q: You left there in 1998?

EICHER: In January of 1998. I retired, actually. I had opened my window, as they call it, at the earliest opportunity when I got to be an FSO-1. My six years ran out at that point.

Q: Peter, did you feel that having concentrated on human rights, we're talking about six or seven years or so, did this detract from your moving ahead in the competitive aspect?

EICHER: Well, I think there is no question about it. As much as the Department continued to say that human rights were at the core of U.S. foreign policy, and as much as the annual big cables used to tout the critical importance of jobs in the functional bureaus, it just wasn't the case in reality. I remember all the hype that was given during the Clinton administration, especially, that what really mattered increasingly in U.S. foreign policy was the emerging global issuecounter-narcotics and the environment and human rightand these were really the cutting edge of what America was trying to do in the world and what mattered to most of the American people. The functional bureaus were going to be equals; "G" (Global Affairs) was created as a new branch of the Department to ensure that these global issues got the attention and priority they deserved. But all this clearly wasn't true at all in terms of what really went on in the State Department and how the Department really worked. I knew this, of course. I liked the new rhetoric and perhaps I was carried away by it to a certain extent, but I had been around long enough to know where the real power in the Department lay. Still, as I mentioned earlier, when I started working on human rights, first in Geneva and later in the human rights bureau, I felt like I had really found my niche, my calling. I really enjoyed doing it, and I felt I was doing something really worthwhile. With human rights, I felt like I was consistently on the right side of internal policy battles and that I was making a positive contribution both to American policy and to improving things for people in the world. So, I was willing to take the chance and remain in a functional bureau. I probably fooled myself into thinking that I was doing things that would be regarded as important enough by the Department that it would also get me promoted. I was running a large, substantive, political office, fourteen people, the kind of substantive office that was generally run by much more senior officers. I had been political counselor at a large mission. I had been involved in many of the biggest issues of U.S. foreign policy. I always got excellent reports and lots of awards, so it seemed like I was making a good career progression, but I guess it was not to be. It was also one of those times, one of those very bad times in the Foreign Service, when there were very few promotions, so you would get these promotion lists that would have maybe six political officers or something like that out of many hundreds.

Q: We go through these things. You know, it's interesting. I've been doing these oral histories now for more than 20 years and I come from the Foreign Service. I came in in 1955 and I've looked at the sweep of things and really, you might say the Department of State and diplomacy in general has changed tremendously in that there are so many international issues such as human rights, arms control, problems with narcotics, and now terrorism and everything else, yet the core of the Foreign Service still holds to the idea that bilateral relations are really the guts of the matter when yes, they're important but one could make a very strong argument that interdependency, internationalization really, this is where diplomacy is going. Did you have a feeling about this?

EICHER: Well, I agree that international affairs are going more in the direction you outlined. I think I would have the same analysis as you that, in fact, these big thematic foreign policy issues are becoming more important and people are more focused on them these days. Many of these issues didn't exist at all in previous years. For example, who would have imagined that we'd have a special ambassador for avian influenza or special offices of the State Department on human trafficking or religious freedom? Other issues that were not regarded as front burner in years past are now recognized as extremely important. When I was in the Department, the counter-terrorism office was regarded very much as a backwater by career people, in the same way that human rights was or perhaps even more so. Now, I suspect that is very much a front burner issue.

The creation of the under secretary for global affairs was intended to make the functional bureaus and their issues much more powerful and much more in tune with the new priorities of policy. The American people it was argued, cared more about environment and human rights and these other cross cutting issues than about bilateral relations with say, Portugal or Tunisia or Sri Lanka. In practice, however, while I was in the Department the undersecretary for global affairs played very much a second fiddle to the other undersecretaries. So that was a disappointment, certainly. It showed that despite the rhetoric and despite a bureaucratic reorganization, the old ways die hard. U.S. foreign policy is still largely driven by the bilateral desks.

It must have been September or October of 1997 when I was informed that I could stay on for one more year. At that point, I decided I wasn't necessarily going to stay on that long if something else came across my plate and I started looking around a little bit. Just a few days later, one of my friends and colleagues who I had worked with in the human rights bureau and the Middle East bureau, but who was now in European affairs, wandered into my office and asked me if I was interested in a job in Poland with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE's human rights office for all of Europe was based in Warsaw. It was a little office called the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). I was aware of this office but I didn't know too much about it or what it did. I heard about it because we dealt with some of the OSCE human rights issues out of my office in the human rights bureau and the ODIHR was involved in some of them. Every year one or two of my people would go to one of the OSCE's human rights conferences, organized by the ODIHR. Anyway, I told him no, I was not particularly interested in going to Poland to work for the OSCE/ODIHR, and I really wanted to look around a bit before taking a position with an organization I wasn't very familiar with. He twisted my arm a little bit and said, "Look, we'll pay for you to go out and spend a couple of days in Warsaw, see the office there, meet the people and then you can come back and decide. No obligation." So, I thought, well, sure, why not? I can go spend a couple of days in Warsaw. I started asking around about the ODIHR and whether it was a good office and if it was doing things that were worthwhile. Was it the kind of organization that would be a good to get a job with? Was it making a difference? Did it have potential? That sort of question. The ODIHR got kind of mixed reviews. Some people said this was a great opportunity, while others though I could do better. In general, the ODIHR was regarded as a little office with a lot of potential, but apparently it had not done much of note up to that time. On the other hand, the OSCE was growing rapidly and becoming more important since the fall of communism and a lot of people felt the trend could continue. Most people felt that with the right kind of leadership, the ODIHR could be a very good office to be involved with.

So I flew out, I spent two days with the new director of the ODIHR, a fellow named Gï¿½rard Stoudmann, who was a Swiss ambassador, and learned about what the ODIHR was doing, or more importantly, what they hoped to do. Stoudmann had just taken over as director. He knew the office had a fairly weak reputation and his goal was to shake it up and try to make something important out of it. It was an office that had about 25 or 30 people. It was doing election monitoring and organizing conferences, and it had a few very, very small programs to try to promote the rule of law and NGO development, primarily in the former Soviet Union and the new Eastern European democracies. I met with all the different section heads and others in the office, who seemed to be a good group of young people. I was very impressed with Stoudmann and with some of his ideas to move the organization forward and shake it up. He had had pledges of money from a couple of countries and he was very politically-minded as well. He seemed like the kind of person who could get a lot of things moving and who was open to new ideas. Anyway, Stoudmann was apparently also reasonably impressed with me, because at the end of my two days, he offered me the position as his deputy or, officially, as "First Deputy Director" of the ODIHR. As the number two person in the office, I would be in charge of all of the substantive and policy sections of the ODIHR; the other deputy director was a Pole who was in charge of administration and personnel issues. It sounded like it could be an exciting job, with a chance to keep working on human rights and democracy issues and to be exposed to an area of the world that was entirely new to me. It turned out, to my surprise, that the position was at the D-1 level, which, for the OSCE, which uses the UN personnel system, is a very senior level position. There were only half a dozen D level positions in the entire OSCE at the time, maybe less even. So here was a great irony and a morale booster: having just been denied promotion into the Senior Foreign Service, it was only about three weeks later and here I was being offered a senior level job in the OSCE, senior level on the UN scale, and really from a financial point of view much better than if I had been promoted. So between the potential of the job itselwhich looked like it could be very interesting, fun and worthwhiland the benefits that went with it, it really was a very attractive offer.

By the time I left Warsaw, I was pretty much convinced from my meetings that this would be a good position to take. I still had one other major consideration, however, and that was how my wife would feel about a move to Poland and whether or not she could get a job in Poland. Stephanie had joined the Foreign Service in 1992 while we were in Geneva, as an office management specialist (OMS). She was assigned to Geneva for three years, including about six months when she worked as my OMS, which I think may be against the rules. But we got along very well; she's great to work with, and very efficient. After Geneva, she was assigned to jobs in Washington at the same time I was, in 1995, first in the Office of Assignments and then in the Press Office. She was amenable to a move to Poland if she could also get a job at the embassy. She started asking around with personnel and it happened that there were vacancies at Embassy Warsaw and they were anxious to get somebody out there just as quickly as they possibly could. She was able to break her assignment in Washington. This was in October or November. The ODIHR agreed to hold the position for me until January, after the Christmas break. I actually made one more trip to Warsaw during this period. The OSCE's big annual human rights conference was being held in Warsaw in November and I was assigned to the U.S. delegation, in order to help get me up to speed on some of the issues I'd be dealing with and to meet some of the delegations I'd be working with. So I spent a couple of weeks in Warsaw in November and then returned to Washington to get ready for the move to Warsaw. I retired from the Department on January 15 and started work again on January 19 in Warsaw. It wasn't a very long retirement.

Q. This was 1998?

EICHER: This was 1998, January 1998.

Q: How long were you in Warsaw?

EICHER: We spent four years in Warsaw. Geneva was the only other place aside from Washington where we ever spent four years. Warsaw was not our favorite city, but it was rapidly becoming more Western and it wasn't a bad place; it was very pleasant in the summer. We can talk a little bit about that, if you want.

My position in Warsaw was a very new experience for me in many ways. I had worked a lot with international organizations but I had never worked actually worked for an international organization before. The ODIHR, as its unfortunate acronym was pronounced (pronounced "oh, dear"), was very international. Most of the local staff was Polish, the head of the office was Swiss, and there was a range of other nationalities, everything from Norwegian to Uzbek. There were two or three other Americans in addition to me. All in all, there were a lot of different working styles, a lot of different approaches to the work, and a lot of cultural baggage, all of which took a little bit of getting used to. But, generally, there was a very positive kind of atmosphere. The staff had a preponderance of young, single people who were just full of energy and enthusiasm and wanted to do good things and change the world in positive ways. There was really a blank sheet in front of us; we had a lot of leeway to decide what we wanted to do and create programs to get it done. The ODIHR was a very young office; it had been created just a few years before, in 1992, I think, as the OSCE "Office for Free Elections." When I got there the ODIHR was still known primarily for its elections work.

Q: I think I worked for them. I monitored two elections in Bosnia.

EICHER: That was probably the ODIHR. For the first postwar Bosnian election, in 1996, a special structure was set up to monitor the elections; the ODIHR was involved, but I don't think it was in charge. Up to that time, it had tended to do very small election observation missions, just a few people for a few days. Within a very few years, however, it was at the forefront of developing the election observation methodology that has now been adopted by just about every serious observation organization, from the UN to the EU.

I neglected to mention earlier that I also monitored a couple of elections in the former Yugoslavia during my time in the Human Rights Bureau, one in Bosnia and in one in Croatia.

Q: What did you do in Bosnia?

EICHER: In Bosnia I was way down south in a little village in the Republic of Srpska. I'd have to think about the name.

Q: I worked out of Tuzla.

EICHER: I was really in the Serb heartland when I was down there on my first mission, in the fall of 1996, and it was quite something. You would have thought it was a perfect election from where we were. Everything was calm and orderly. All the voters were meek and busy voting for their hard-line wartime leaders.

Q: This is it. You know, they voted the way you think they would but they did it nicely.

EICHER: They did it nicely. And the buses of refugees who were supposed to be arriving from the other parts of Bosnia to vote never arrived, for whatever reason. So, everything was calm and fine in the little villages I visited, although it was far from a good election if you looked at the big picture. In fact, the 1996 Bosnian elections were a big bureaucratic controversy within the Department, while I was in the human rights bureau. There was a big dispute over whether the elections should be rushed forward or postponed. DRL's position was that conditions didn't exist for free elections. There was still no freedom of movement; people couldn't go home to vote or couldn't campaign in areas outside their ethnic group. There was still lots of intimidation. But, we were overridden and the U.S. position was that Bosnia should have elections as soon as possible so there would be new, legitimately elected leaders who could be partners in implementing the Dayton peace accords. Well, we know what happened. The elections went ahead and each ethnic group elected the worst of hardliners to represent it, causing all kinds of problems for years.

I don't remember too much about the Croatian elections I monitored from DRL, except that I was assigned with a few other State Department people to observe in Vukovar, Eastern Slavonia, which was the most war-damaged area in Croatia. It really was a depressing place; much of the city had been destroyed and it was not yet rebuilt. I was with several other State Department observers and there were special arrangements for us, even though we were folded into the broader international observation. I was the only one from the human rights bureau; most of the others were from the desk. When we started to go around on election day, we found that most of the polling stations weren't even open. I thought this was terrible, of course, but my colleagues tended to minimize the problem, saying things like, "oh, it's only an hour or two late; there's still plenty of time for people to vote." Eventually, however, it was clear even to them that things weren't what they should be. We ended up meeting with some of the senior international personnel in charge and leaning on them to fix the problems and extend the voting hours, which they ultimately did.

In any case, getting back to the ODIHR, it was originally created in about 1992 as the OSCE Office for Free Elections, and after it had existed only a couple of years its mandate was expanded and it became the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rightthe ODIHbecause the OSCE political masters decided that there were a lot of additional things the OSCE should be doing to promote democracy, beyond just elections. For its first few years, the ODIHR continued to concentrate on elections, but it also began to hold several big seminars each year on human rights and democracy issues, like freedom of the press or freedom of religion, or whatever the issue of the moment was. It also started to run just a couple of very small projects to promote democracy, for example bringing judges from the new countries of Central Asia to meet with European judges. Stoudmann, who was elected as the ODIHR director less than six months before he hired me as his deputy, thought that the big meetings were not very productive. They were mainly talk shops that were very nice but didn't really accomplish very much. So, he had a plan to shift part of the ODIHR budget from meetings to projects. He had already convinced the Permanent Counciwhich was the OSCE's governing body, made up of the ambassadors of the 55 participating stateto provide the ODIHR with more personnel and more resources.

One of the other big things which had just happened was that the Danes had given $500,00which was a massive amount of money for the ODIHR at that timto develop a bunch of projects to promote democracy. This was going to be the first time that the ODIHR in its non-election work could actually do something significant other than just hold conferences. It was a chance to do some real hands-on work. This was the situation when I went to Warsaw for my interview. They had the first pledge of money and the general concept of changing and expanding their activities, but they really hadn't put much into place. So, this is one of the things that attracted me to the job. People had been telling me that the ODIHR was a little office that had potential, but I could now see that the potential was genuine. This seemed like someplace where I might make a real difference. It was also a major new challenge in the sense that as the director of DRL/BA, I was sort of the U.S. government's main "finger-pointer" on human rights. A big part of my job and the job of my office was to point out what was wrong with everyone's human rights practices. I saw the ODIHR as an office where I would be much less focused on what country was committing what sort of human rights violations, and more on trying to do something about it. Instead of spending most of my time criticizing countries, or in internal bureaucratic battles, I would need to develop programs and projects that would actually lead to better practices.

Much of my job at the ODIHR became trying to help develop exactly what these programs would be, and where and how we would do them. At the same time, I became very involved in trying to raise more money from governments to do more programs and develop entirely new areas. And, of course, we also continued and expanded our election work. It just turned into a great job, a wonderful experience, at just the right time and the right place. Communism had fallen and the former communist countries opened their arms to us. They wanted to be seen as "Westerners" or at least as reliable partners. They wanted to be democracies, or, at least, they said they did. They all wanted to be part of Europe. They saw OSCE as one of their tickets to all these things they wanted.

Some of the countries were implementing very radical reforms and looking for help and advice. Even those which didn't seriously want to change wanted to look like they were changing, so they also had open arms for us. The Western members of the OSCE, meanwhile, were looking for respectable organizations which would take on some of the work of helping to build democracy in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They had their own assistance programs and had been giving money to NGOs, but they were very pleased to help out an international organization, of which they were members, to also do this kind of work. It was almost like knocking on open doors to get contributions from the Western governments for the kinds of programs that we thought we might do. During my four years in Warsaw we grew the office to over 100 people, from 25 or so when I arrived. Our voluntary contributions from governments increased more than tenfold; we were up to about $6 million a year from the $500,000 when I started work in Warsaw. This amount of money is peanuts for governments, of course, which was one of the reasons why we were able to get it. But, for the kind of programs we were doing, it was real money. It was mainly "political money," if you want to call it that, rather than aid money, that is, very little of it had the kinds of string attached and bureaucratic oversight that governmental foreign assistance offices usually require. From State Department, for example, we were getting money mainly from the European bureau and also from the refugee bureau; and it tended to be contributions with no strings attached. The spirit of the U.S. contributions was "here's a contribution of $50,000 or $80,000; do something good with it," or "here, you said you wanted to start a program to combat trafficking. We think that's a good idea and here's a contribution." We kept careful track of the money, of course, but we found that we didn't have all kinds of people looking over our shoulders and we were seldom asked for a detailed accounting. It was the same with most of our other contributors. At first, we drew up a list of little projects that we went looking for contributors for, and that worked pretty well, but over time, as we built our record as an office that was doing impressive things, we moved more towards larger contributions for general program arealike rule of law, or rights of womerather than, say a particular small project on women in Tajikistan. One of the fund-raising tricks I learned was to go to countries as they approached the end of their fiscal year. In the U.S., government, there is always a little money left on the shelf as the fiscal year ends that needs to be spent or returned to the treasury. The same was true for other countries. So, in addition to the annual plan we had drawn up, we would go to various countries as the end of their fiscal year was approaching with some ideas of worthwhile activities they could fund for us. As a result, we tended to get our big United States contributions in August or September as the fiscal year was coming to a close. We would get the Canadians and, I think, the British in March as their fiscal year was coming to a close, and most of the Europeans in December as their fiscal year was ending.

Now, with this money we started a number of different programs and projects. In some cases a country came to us and said, you know, we would like your help with a prison reform project or a project to train judges, those kinds of things. Most often, however, we would originate ideas and projects out of the office in Warsaw, or as the result of needs assessment trips to various countries.

This left me with a lot of leeway to decide what kind of programs to develop. We were really able to get into a lot of different things. One of the first things I noticed about the OSCE once I started working there was how backwards they were on women's rights, which, you'll recall, I had worked a lot on at State. So, one of the first things I did was to start a program to promote the rights and equality of women; I believe this was the first one ever in the OSCE. We were able to get a grant of money from one of the Nordic countries and to get an expert seconded by the UK. With these, we were able to start a program to advance women's rights, including lots of little projects from legal clinics for women in Tajikistan to training women members of parliament in Azerbaijan. This was very well received by OSCE member states, which were very impressed with the kinds of things we were able to do with a very small pot of money. It led to increasing support for the ODIHR as we branched out into other areas. We also did a little internal work on gender equality within the organization, drawing up the first OSCE plawhich was adoptefor requiring a professional working environment, free from discrimination or harassment.

The OSCE, meanwhile, had tiny offices established in several of the countries of the former Soviet Union and was establishing new ones where they didn't already exist. We were able to use these as sort of our embassies, to have representatives on the ground in these various countries. This worked out very well, because these offices tended to be little four or five person offices that often didn't have clear mandates and sometimes didn't really know what to do with themselves, or have the resources to do things if they did know what they wanted to do. So, in general, they tended to welcome us and cooperated well with us. If we said, hey, you know, "we've got $100,000; how about starting a program to train police officers in human rights or to reform prisons or to develop non-governmental organizations," they would say "wow, great, yes!" The host government had to agree and it virtually always would since there was no stigma attached to our programs. We negotiated formal agreement"memoranda of understanding" with the five Central Asian "stans" and the tree Caucasus countries. These were frameworks for projects that we would carry out in each country, so they were formally approved by the governments, which made it far easier when it came time to implement something that required government cooperation.

One of the programs we started was on ending human trafficking. Again, we were able to get a seconded persothis time from the United States, as well as a seconded person from Austrito start the program. This was the OSCE's first anti-trafficking program. It grew dramatically and soon became a major theme in the organization.

We were also able to start a program to combat torture. We knew this could be a very sensitive subject, so we handled it carefully. We created a little panel of experts and were able to enlist five of the world's leading experts on combating torture, who all happily agreed to act as sort of an advisory board for us. We got the UN Special Rapporteur against torturSir Nigel Rodley; the International Committee of the Red Cross's head of protectioDanielle Caucause; Amnesty International's head of European and Central Asian Affairlan Gorvin; the head of the biggest torture treatment and rehabilitation center in the U.S. Doug Johnson; and a retired head of the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of TorturClaude Nicolay. So it was a very elite, very distinguished, group. This was vitally important in giving credibility to our program and gaining acceptance for it. If this panel looked at our program and said yes, this is a good program and yes, it does not duplicate what is being done elsewhere and yes, it would be a good thing to spend money on, then the donors and the recipient countries were both satisfied. So we protected ourselves from criticism on one of the most sensitive issues we were dealing with, as well as getting help in developing a useful program. We came up with many kinds of little projects within this program, things like trying to change legislation, trying to get countries to report more effectively to the UN as they were required to do under the Convention Against Torture, trying to change practices in prison administration. We got a couple of very good prison experts who would visit countries and offer free advice. It was amazing to see what they could accomplish, just by making a suggestion. For example, they'd ask, "why don't you let prisoners out to exercise twice a day instead of once a day? Or why don't you let the prisoners plant a garden to grow vegetables?" The answer would usually be, "gee, we never thought of that; sure, we could do that." We actually helped establish a college in Croatia, specifically to train prison guards in good practices.

We had a rule of law program; we had a special program to develop ombudsmen and national human rights commissions. We also did programs on freedom of movement, such as trying to end the so-called propiska system, the old Soviet system, which was still in practice in much of the region, that prevented people from living or moving where they wanted to. We established a big program on Roma and Sinti, that is, gypsies, who were probably the most persecuted minority throughout Europe. We became one of the best respected organizations in Europe for dealing with Roma and Sinti problems and we started programs trying to improve conditions for them and have their grievances heard. Almost all of these programs were developed while I was there, by people I recruited. It was great fun and very rewarding. You felt as if you were really doing something important, things that actually helped people and strengthened freedom.

Q: By this time were the Roma pretty well settled? I mean, one of the problems used to be that, gypsies would move back and forth. Was an effort made or had things happened so that they were now more or less in place?

EICHER: Most of them were settled in place, although there are still some "travelers," as they call them, in Europe. The Roma in most European countries, however, are really at the lowest levels of society. Very often they live in poverty and face a lot of discrimination. The treatment they got in some places was truly outrageous. In many places there is still a very general sense of the Roma being "Gypsies, tramps, and thieves." They were not welcome. It reached the point that in Slovakia, one town was trying to build walls around the Roma neighborhoods to separate them from the rest of the citizens, literally to put them into a walled ghetto. Discrimination against Roma was a problem all over Europe. The biggest Roma community in Europe was actually in Spain, but the Roma were practically every place. Many people don't know that they were hit very hard by the Holocaust. Hitler tried to eliminate Gypsies as well as Jews and others, and many, many of them went to the death camps. A lot of the big Roma communities had been in Eastern Europe and they, in particular, suffered during the war. I think it was really under communism that the Eastern and Central European Roma were finally forced to settle down and end their nomadic existence. But, generally they were living in very bad conditions. Our Roma program was a small one, as most of our programs were. There was a limited amount we could do. But we could help galvanize the Roma voice and help them develop common positions which could be pressed internationally. We did this, sometimes quite effectively. In fact, the OSCE adopted a number of standards on Roma and we could use these as ammunition whenever there was a serious problem of discrimination, to try to twist a country's arms and make them abide by better practices.

I should say that the OSCE had wonderful documents on human rights, starting with the Helsinki Accords back in 1976, before the OSCE was even an organization, when it was still the CSCE (the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe). As communism began to fall, the CSCE transformed itself into the OSCE and adopted a whole series of accords setting human rights standards that in many ways were much stronger than UN or other standards. However, they were political agreements rather than legal treaties, so they were politically and morally binding on the states, rather than legally binding. The various documents could be used to put pressure on states that weren't doing things they should. We could use them to do a little finger-pointing and to insist that a country was obliged to do something or stop doing something, but there was there was no enforcement mechanism other than opprobrium. Nonetheless, we did act as a pressure point within the OSCE, for example, pushing for the release of political prisoners in various countries and for changes in particular practices. I remember getting half a dozen political prisoners released in Turkmenistan, once. Another example was exit visas, which were still required by most of the former Soviet states. If someone wanted to leave the country, even for a vacation, they would need to get an exit visa. At a minimum, this was a huge hassle for people, and often it was used by a government to prevent critics from traveling. Exit visas were contrary to the freedom of movement principles the OSCE had adopted and we helped persuade a number of states to do away with exit visas.

Q: Your office in the OSCE, the basic concentration was the former Soviet Union, wasn't it? And Yugoslavia?

EICHER: It was, yes.

Q: The Soviet Bloc essentially.

EICHER: Yes, very much. Very much so, and especially the countries of the former Soviet Union. At first, we were doing programs in some of the Eastern European countries, former Soviet Bloc countries like Poland, but they were changing so quickly that they soon became our partners. They didn't even call themselves Eastern Europeans, in fact; they were now "Central Europeans" and they were looking West rather than East. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO while I was living in Warsaw; it was a very big event for them; there was a big celebration. They were also moving to join the European Union. So, while we still did a few little programs in some of these countries, we were relying more and more on the Central Europeans to provide us with experts to work on countries further east, in the former Soviet Union, as well as in the Balkans. With the Poles, for example, we set up a nice program to bring border guards from the former Soviet Union countries to Poland to be trained by the Poles. The Central Europeans wouldn't take any guff from the former Sovietthat is, they wouldn't show any sympathy to arguments like "change takes a long time" or "its difficult to break down years of communist tradition," since they were making the changes quickly and successfully themselves.

We also occasionally got into projects with other countries, even Western countries, on issues like combating human trafficking or Roma rights, but generally our programs were in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. We tried to get something going with Turkey, but the Turks didn't want us involved, so we worked a bit around the margins there. We were one of the sponsors of the "Istanbul Protocol," which is now well known in its field as a compendium of best practices for doctors to determine if a person has been tortured. That was one of our anti-torture projects.

Getting back to the question of where we focused our work, by the end of my time in Warsaw, we started to run into a little bit of a problem with our election programs because they were so heavily focused on the eastern part of the OSCE. The easterners started to get a little sensitive about this, and rightly so. They said there were problems with elections everywherlook at Florida as just one example; the 2000 Florida election fiasco, if you want to call it that, took place while I was at the ODIHR. So, they asked, why should we focus just on them? This was to some extent a rhetorical question. They didn't really care very much what was happening in Western elections, they just wanted to deflect attention from their own problematic elections and they thought that by emphasizing problems in the West, their own deficiencies wouldn't seem so bad, or at least would be seen in a different context.

Whatever their motives, it was actually a good point that no election is perfect and all countries should be considering ways to improve their election processes. So, we started to expand our election programs to look at elections in Western countries of the OSCE as well as in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Before I left the ODHIR, we had done the first assessment of a Western election. France invited us to take a look at their election and we sent a very small team for a week or so that assessed the process and prepared a short report. It wasn't a big thing but, nevertheless, it was a good, symbolic gesture that everybody's elections could be looked at. Later, this effort was expanded to include many other Western countries, including the United States. I actually headed ODIHR election missions to several Western countries, including Spain, the UK and Italy, but that was later, after I had left full time work and the ODIHR and started working as a consultant.

In any event, I've started talking about elections, and so I should step back a little and put the ODIHR's election work into context since up to now, I've been describing the ODIHR's democracy programs and haven't really mentioned elections. I started with the democracy programs since they were interesting and fun because that part of the office barely existed when I got there. That was where we had the real growth and where we could develop all kinds of new, and hopefully valuable programs. I was involved in building that up pretty much from scratch. Still, what the ODIHR was best known for before I got there, while I was there, and since, is its work on elections and, in particular, election observation.

The ODIHR's election observation program already existed when I arrived in Warsaw. I think I mentioned that the office started out as the OSCE Office for Free Elections. The election observation program had started as a very small and unprofessional kind of operation where they would send two or three people out a couple of days before an election to look at what was going on and write a report. This had already developed into something much bigger and more systematic and was continuing to grow and to become more professional and better respected during my tenure. By the time I arrived at the start of 1998, the ODIHR election section had developed and begun to implement a professional and systematic methodology for effective observation.

I think few people who read about election observation really understand what a large scale and complex operation it can be. The ODIHR's system was to send a team out to the country to start following the election process on the ground about six weeks before voting day. This would include a "core team" of eight or ten experts on elections, politics, media, and legal affairs, plus 20 or 30 "long term observers" who would be stationed around the country to follow election developments in the different regions. Then, a few days before the election, a large numbeoften hundredof "short term observers," STOs, would arrive in country. We'd train them and brief them, then send them out all around the country to serve as poll watchers and also to watch the vote counting. The STOs would fill out forms for each polling station they visited, answering questions like, "was it too crowded? Was the voting done in secret? Did the polling officials know what they were doing and did they follow the rules? Was there any ballot box stuffing or other blatant fraud going on? Was the atmosphere intimidating?" and so forth. Then, their forms would be send back to the core team where a statistician would enter it all into a computer. Between the STO forms and their descriptive comments, we would get a very good quantitative and qualitative overview of election day on which to base our assessment. Between the core team's long-term observations of the campaign period and the STO observations, we were able to offer a studied and credible assessment of what was right and wrong with the election and even had statistics to back up our conclusions.

As the years went by, the system was increasingly refined. We produced a methodology on how to review and assess election legislation, which, of course, is a key element of any election process. We also produced guidelines for minority participation in elections. Later, we did a handbook on observing women's participation in electionl actually authored that one, after I moved on from the ODIHR. So, it was a very good, and very effective methodology, which brought us a lot of credit.

Election observation became a huge operation. A really big mission might involve well over 1,000 people, including core team, STOs and local hires, who were mainly interpreters and drivers. It was very complex administratively, as well as being politically sensitive. We would do about 10 of these operations every year, so it took an enormous amount of work. We were very cost effective since all the STOs were seconded by governments and had to pick up all of their own expenses. We costed it out once and found that we typically were running a good-sized election observation for $200,000 or $250,000 that would have cost ten times as much if we had had to pay for all the STOs. At first I though that we would run into donor fatigue, that U.S. and the Western Europeans would soon be reluctant to foot the bill for so many election observations, year after year. But it turned out that was not a problem. The donor countries were very supportive and didn't balk at all even as the operations got larger and more complex.

On the political side, election observation was very significant. Very few people in the United States have ever heard of the OSCE, much less the ODIHR. In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, however, the ODIHR was very well known. We would get a lot of publicity. People waited for the statement we'd issue after election day and would pay careful attention to it. We were the biggest and most credible of the election observer organizations, so our judgment was seen as the most authentic assessment of whether an election was free and fair. The governments desperately wanted our seal of approval, since they saw it as recognition that they were joining the ranks of Western democracies. If we issued a negative report, it might effect a country's relations with the West, or it would at least give that country's leader the stigma of having taken office as a result of a less than democratic contest. So the stakes were high and sometimes we would come under a lot of pressure from governments to tone down our criticisms. I think we did very well in maintaining an independent, unbiased approach and issuing honest, often very critical assessments. In a few cases, our statements may have contributed to domestic unrest. Some countries adopted our recommendations and things improved significantly from election to election. In other countries, particularly in Caucasus and Central Asia, progress was much less evident, and in some cases, things even moved backwards from the initial democratic push that followed the fall of communism.

Q: How about the former Yugoslavia? What were you doing there?

Well, that's interesting. First of all, the former Yugoslavia is where the OSCE really got its start as an organization that did work in the field, as opposed to the old CSCE, which was really centered on conferences and negotiations. When the peace agreements on Yugoslavia were hammered together, the OSCE was given a big role, in part because the UN had gotten a bit of a bad name in Yugoslavia for being ineffective in ending the war or protecting civilians. So, there was this large OSCE mission set up in Bosnia and smaller ones in other former Yugoslav countries. The missions were disproportionately large compared to OSCE headquarters in Vienna. At first there was, maybe, several hundred OSCE staff assigned to the missions in the Balkans, and only a couple dozen people working at headquarters in Vienna. It really seemed like the tail wagging the dog. Anyway, because there were these big OSCE missions in the Balkans that were at the time larger than the ODIHR, we decided that our comparative advantage lay elsewhere and we concentrated our programs on the former Soviet countries rather than the former Yugoslavia. We did monitor elections in the Balkans and we had a few little programs here and there in cooperation with the OSCE missionI mentioned earlier our prison reform program, which worked mainly in Croatia. I also went to Macedonia at one point and set up a program there to train police on human rights; this was a joint effort with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Soros Foundation. But, generally we were not heavily involved in programming in the former Yugoslavia in the way that we were in the former Soviet countries.

There were three main exceptions to this. One was human trafficking, where we started quite a large program. The Austrian government seconded a former cabinet minister to us who served as coordinator for a big anti-trafficking initiative focused on the Balkans. It was awkward, at times, because she was based in Vienna, not Warsaw, and she could be a bit of a loose cannon. She reported to me and I spent a lot of time working with her, to make sure her many initiatives made sense in the OSCE context and that we weren't committing ourselves to things we couldn't budget or support adequately. But some good things came out of it, especially in terms of building international awareness, and consensus on the need to fight human trafficking, even in Europe.

Second, for a couple of years the ODIHR, through a quirk, had a little office in Montenegro that functioned like an OSCE mission would. This was at the time that Montenegro was still part of Serbia and Montenegro. There was a lot of tension between Serbia and Montenegro, and a lot of tension within Montenegro. The OSCE would have liked to have an office there, but the government in Belgrade refused. The ODIHR had monitored an election in Montenegro and we decided to keep our election office open, ostensibly to do election follow-up work. In practice, however, we really ran a political mission which spent most of its time following and reporting on political developments. The new Montenegrin government was happy with this, even if the Serbs weren't. And, since there were no other foreign representatives in Podgorica at the time, our guys were producing very valuable political reporting which was much appreciated by Vienna and others. A number of countries gave us contributions to keep the office open without having to go through the Vienna budget approval process. Our office was headed by a very effective British former army officer, Julian Peel Yates, who was well respected by all sides. His reports would come to me for approval, then I'd send them on to the designated list of recipients. So, our ODIHR office in Warsaw was actually playing a valuable role in keeping international links open to Montenegro at a time when it was very isolated and when it might easily have swung the way of the Serbs.

Our third major undertaking in the former Yugoslavia was a big Kosovo project. The Kosovo crisis had been brewing since even before Yugoslavia broke up, but it came to a head in 1998, with the outbreak of serious fighting between the Serbs and the Kosovo Liberation Army. In the last half of 1998, there was a UN-sponsored peace agreement, which, among other things provided for the creation of an OSCE "Kosovo Verification Mission" (KVM) to monitor compliance with the ceasefire. The ODIHR helped establish the human rights section of the KVM and we seconded one of our best officers to go down and set it up. One of its main activities was to monitor, investigate and document human rights violations. Since the KVM became a huge undertaking relative to the size of the ODIHR, we pretty much bowed out after the initial stages of setting up the human rights section. But, then things got much worse in Kosovo, the ceasefire fell apart, and the Serbs started a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Kosovars. The security situation became so bad that the KVM evacuated to Albania and Macedonia and then was disbanded. This was the situation that eventually led to the U.S. bombing campaign against Serbia.

Back at the ODIHR, we saw a real risk that all the valuable information gathered by the KVM would be lost. There were lots of press reports and anecdotal reports of the horrors that were going on in Kosovo, but the KVM files were a treasure trove of detailed information gathered by a leading international organization. Lots of it had been piled in the back of Landrovers as the KVM was leaving Kosovo and was sitting unorganized in boxes in private apartments in Skopje. There was no system or capacity in the OSCE even to hang on to this stuff. So, since it was human rights material and the KVM was in the process of ceasing to exist, we arranged to have the materials transferred to the ODIHR in Warsaw. The Poles even sent a military plane down to pick it up and provided security for us once it was in Poland. We assembled a team of half a dozen people, many of them former KVM human rights officers, led by the head of the ODIHR's human rights section, to review and compile the material. The result, after months of work, was a huge book that documents the horrendous sequence and scale of human rights violations in Kosovo. It was called Kosovo/Kosova, As Seen, As Told, which came to more than 400 pages of small print, meticulously documented with thousands of footnotes, compiled from eyewitness and refugee accounts and OSCE investigations. It was by far the most comprehensive account of the horrors of Kosovo that eventually led to the NATO bombing of Serbia. It makes for really depressing, horrific reading, but it tells a story that should not be forgotten. We worked in consultation with the War Crimes Tribunal, which was grateful for our contribution. The book is a very important work, which is still relevant. Anyone who doesn't understand why the Kosovars were demanding independence from Serbia could flip though its pages and see exactly why.

Q: What about the worst of the "stans," Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan?

EICHER: Well, I visited both of them lots of times. When I began work with the OSCE, all of the Central Asian countries were very much in this mode of "we're moving toward democracy and we want to be accepted as a Western country; we do want to improve human rights and we want your help." This was the public line, at least, and we did our best to hold them to it. Uzbekistan, in fact, was the very first country that the ODIHR signed a memorandum of understanding with. This was an agreement to start to do some little projects in Uzbekistan. We were able to carry those out without any significant interference from the government even at a time when other NGOs were having great problems trying to do human rights and democracy work in Uzbekistan. After Uzbekistan signed its agreement with the ODIHR, the other Central Asians we very much in a "me too" mode. Uzbekistan had gotten a lot of good publicity from its agreement with us and the others wanted to jump on the bandwagon. The ODIHR was not seen as threatening. The Uzbekistan agreement had just been signed when I joined the ODIHR, but I was heavily involved in the negotiations of the agreements with the other Central Asia countries, and the Caucasus countries. I remember some fairly difficult trips and talks to put together the agreements with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

Turkmenistan was the only country where the negotiations finally died. We were unsuccessful there. We tried for a couple of years. We went back and forth with them on the substance of an agreement and we thought we would be able to succeed because all of the other four "stans" had agreed to essentially the same language. Turkmenistan, however, was the most closed and repressive of all the countries, and that was reflected in the positions it took. It insisted, that for example, we take the words "human rights" out of the agreement, which we thought was too high a price. So, we were able to do some tiny, tiny things in Turkmenistan through the OSCE office there, by sending them very small amounts of money to hold a meeting on this, or conference on that, or a training session on something else, but it was very sporadic and very small and not very effective. It was increasingly clear that Turkmenistan was moving in the wrong direction. The president, Niyazov, who styled himself "Turkmenbashi," or the "Father of the Turkmen," was building a cult of personality similar to what you'd see in North Korea. He built huge monuments to himself, including one in the center of Ashgabat that looked like a huge spaceship, with a golden statue of himself on top that rotated so he was always facing the sun. He renamed the months of the year after himself and his family. He began to dismantle the country's health and education systems and deliberately to move towards isolation. For me, the last straw came when had himself elected "president for life." That's completely contrary to all the democratic principles enshrined in OSCE documents. This happened at Christmastime in 1999 or 2000. I was in charge of the ODIHR over the holidays and I tried to get the OSCE to react. I lobbied the Chairman in OfficNorway, at the timand some of the big member states, but no one wanted to take strong action. I even drew up a graduated list of steps the OSCE might take, things like recalling the OSCE ambassador for consultations. There was absolutely no political will to do anything. I finally threatened the Norwegians that if they didn't at least issue a critical statement, then the ODIHR would issue its own, which would make it look like they had missed the boat or were weak-kneed or both. They finally caved and issued a reasonable statement, but no further action against Turkmenistan was taken.

Q: Did you find the development of the European Union was helping or hurting the things you were trying to accomplish in the OSCE?

EICHER: The Europeans, like the Americans, were very strongly in favor of the kinds of things that the OSCE was doing on human rights, very strong supporters, gave a lot of money for it. If there was a problem that we could see for the future, it was that the European Union was expanding so much or looking to expand so much that it could start to raise a question of what would be its relative role to the OSCE. You would very soon get to a point when more than half the OSCE countries were also members of the European Union. The question was, what would that mean for the OSCE?

The more difficult division within the OSCE, which has become even more pronounced in recent years, was the split between the Westerners and most of the former Soviet countries. Because of the work we at the ODIHR were doing on human rights, we started to run afoul of a number of the former Soviets. There were still huge problems in Chechnya at the time. We helped set up a little OSCE/Council of Europe office in Chechnya to help monitor what was going on there. The Russians agreed to that but as we found ourselves getting more and more critical of the Russians and the Uzbeks and some of the others, they became more and more critical of us. You could already start to see on the horizon that there could be problems ahead for the OSCE if these types of strains were not very carefully managed.

While I spent most of my time at the ODIHR working on the different human rights and democracy and election programs and managing the office on a day-to-day basis, the ODIHR director, Ambassador Stoudmann, who didn't really have a deep background in human rights and democracy, spent most of his time trying to keep the political side of it together. He was very politically savvy and was a master of operating within the OSCE. Despite some the problems we were facing, he was able consistently to build sufficient political support to ensure that the office could continue to do its work and even to expand its work continually into new areas. He traveled constantly and was in Warsaw only maybe a third or a quarter of the time. When he came back from a trip, he would often have another little project in one country or another that that we would have to implement to keep some president or foreign minister happy. These sudden, little additions to an already heavy workload used to drive the staff crazy, especially since they were not always self-evidently useful from a substantive perspective. I had to spend a lot of time explaining to young staffers that we were a political office, and that the cost of doing our real substantive work sometimes included building broad support by doing things that might not be as useful, but were nevertheless not harmful. So, we might have to put on a little seminar in Moscow or send an expert on something to Tashkent, which wasn't on the original work plan and might not accomplish much, but it was well worth it to build the goodwill and cooperation we needed. I should say to Stoudmann's credit, as well, that he was very supportive of most of the things I was doing. I think he was initially skeptical of some of the human rights things that I initiated but he came to trust me and to give me pretty much a free hand to start new programs and to move things forward.

The OSCE operates by consensus. Decisions are taken by the Permanent Council in Vienna, or by the annual meetings of foreign ministers. Getting consensus among 55 countries can be hard, of course and it can be a formula for paralysis, since you can't do anything unless everybody agrees. The OSCE, as an organization, was often tied up in knots by the objections of just a handful of countries, or even just a couple. At the ODIHR, however, we found a way to sidestep this problem. We decided that since the member countrieor "participating states," as they were callehad adopted all these wonderful human rights agreements and since the ODIHR's mandate was to promote democracy and human rights, we would pursue whatever activities or programs we thought best and if anyone objected then it was up to them to get a consensus to tell us to stop. This was pretty gutsy, of course, and I think Stoudmann deserves a lot of credit for his willingness to lead us in that direction. If we had agreed to submit our program to the Permanent Council for them to approve every project, it would have been politically safer, but it would have made it impossible to get a lot of things done. The ODIHR had a number of good protectors in the organization, including the U.S., Canada and the Western and Central Europeans, and this put us in a very strong position in terms of there being no chance for a consensus against what we were doing. Also, since most of our projects were funded through voluntary contributions, there was never even a serious threat to our budget while I was there. Still, as I think I've explained, we didn't do things that were deliberately confrontational or a slap in the face to different countries. We were critical, in many cases, but we tried to do it constructively since, after all, we were the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, rather than confrontation in Europe. So, we did to always try to work in a positive way but because of the approach that we adopted we were able to do many things that the Permanent Council might never have approved if we had sought approval.

I mentioned that Stoudmann was initially skeptical of some of the programs I wanted to start, and I think this deserves a few words of explanation. For example, when I started the first ODIHR program on women's rights, his attitude was sort of typical of what you were getting from most old-time European diplomats at the time, kind of rolling his eyes and thinking that this was just a not-very-useful effort to be "politically correct," that it was kind of a waste of time and effort but, you know, "go ahead, Peter, if it pleases you." Then, as the program was launched, he started getting compliments from many of the member countries about how nice it was to see the OSCE working on women's rights and how much they liked our program. He was extremely politically astute and picked the signals instantly that the ODIHR was doing something new that was earning it political credit, and he quickly became a supporter of the program. I'm not sure he was ever a true believer, but after that he said and did all the right things to help us build and expand the program. The next time I wanted to start up a program, on torture or on combating human trafficking and so forth, he might still be skeptical at first but he'd say "okay, you can try that." As he saw that each program was carefully managed and well regarded by the members, I was able to build his confidence in the programs, and in me. He was able to reap credit politically for all we were doing. I think we made a good team and that we really did push things forward. During my four years at the ODIHR the office tripled in size, to about 100 people from over 30 different countries, and the voluntary contributions we were getting from member countries increased tenfold. It was very rewarding to build an organization like that, that was doing good things and making a difference.

Q: All right. Then you left the ODIHR in 2002?

EICHER: The beginning of 2002. The OSCE at that point had a rule that you could only be in a senior position for four years. The idea was to avoid establishing a large, permanent bureaucracy like the UN. The OSCE's strengths were supposed to be that it was adaptable and quick-moving, which it was, at least in comparison with other international organizations.

Q: It made good sense.

EICHER: I think it made good sense, yes. You lost a lot of institutional memory and that could be a problem. But you also gained by ensuring that you didn't fall into bureaucratic ruts and that there was always new people and new thinking coming in. Not long after I left, however, they started extending the lengths of time that people can remain in the organization and the bureaucracy has really grown. When I speak to people who are now in the ODIHR, I find they have many more constraints than we did. I don't think we could have accomplished all we did under today's restraints.

One of the more interesting things I did in the four years I was with the ODIHR was traveling with the OSCE chairman-in-office. Each year, one of the foreign ministers of Europe would serve as chairman of the OSCE and each year, as part of their duties, it became sort of a tradition for the Chairman to travel to all of the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus to wave the OSCE flag and to try to make progress on whatever the issues of the moment were. I traveled on most of these trips. The foreign minister of Polanat the time it was Bronislaw Geremewas chairman one year and I went with him on several trips. Then I did the same with the foreign minister of Austria, Benita Ferrero-Waldner and the foreign minister of Romania, Mircea Geoana. After having served in the State Department, it was an interesting study in contrasts to see first hand how other foreign ministries and foreign ministers work. For one thing, the scale is far smaller. Even in a multilateral delegation, there were far, far fewer people on any of these delegations than on a secretary of state trip. We had at the most a dozen substantive people on each delegation, including the foreign minister and his or her aides, representatives from a couple of other countries, and a few of us from the OSCE permanent staff. I occasionally ended up as note-taker and reporting officer for the meetings, a familiar role from my State Department days. It was also fun because we'd meet in each country with the president, or at least the foreign minister, so I got a lot of very interesting exposure to President Shevardnadze in Georgia, and Akayev in Kyrgyzstan, and Kocharian in Armenia and many others. It was a very interesting time to meet some of these former Soviet strongmen who were still in power in the various countries. The close proximity to the OSCE chairmen on these trips also enabled me to do some good, now and then, since I could whisper in their ear about issues they should raise and most of them were quite responsive. The Polish foreign minister, Geremek, in particular, had been a political prisoner under the communists and was a strong advocate of human rights. As we were about to land in Turkmenistan, I handed him a list of half a dozen political prisoners and suggested he should ask for their release. He did raise it, and several were released shortly thereafter. The Romanian also raised a lot of human rights issues in Central Asia. Interestingly, the Austrian foreign ministry were much less organized than either the two Eastern European countries on the trips; their lack of organization even got a bit embarrassing at timethings like not making clear who was supposed to be at what meeting or what dinner, so more people would show up than there were places for.

Speaking of high-level meetings, each year the OSCE would have an annual conference of foreign ministers where we would have lots of close contact with foreign ministers of various countries and there was one OSCE summit while I was there, the 1999 Istanbul Summit. I think the heads of government of virtually all 55 OSCE states were there, which was really fascinating. We had Bill Clinton there and Boris Yeltsin and everybody else who was a head of government at that time, gathered in this wonderful palace in Turkey on the shores of the Bosporus. From a personal perspective, it was quite a contrast from my State Department experience. I had a number of Foreign Service friends who were also there in Istanbul with the U.S. delegation and they weren't even allowed into the conference hall, which was limited to four persons from each country. But the ODIHR had two seats at the main table, so I was at ringside. There was a wonderful moment where Boris Yeltsin was complaining about the OSCE criticizing human rights problems in Chechnya and Clinton intervened, waving his finger across the room at Yeltsin and telling him, "Mr. President, I remember when you were standing on a tank defending democracy and freedom in Russia and how much we admired you for that and how can you not support the same kind of thing now?" However, it was done in a friendly kind of way since, after all, this was supposed to be a group of friends and it was a closed meeting in a fairly small conference room.

Let me mention one other funny story from the conference. The summit was held at a time when President Lukashenko of Belarus was starting to be one of the great bï¿½tes noire of the United States. Clinton had been very carefully briefed to give the cold shoulder to this last remaining Soviet-style dictator in Western Europe. When Clinton walked into the Summit meeting hall on the first day, all the heads of state were being seated around the table; most of them were already there. Clinton started going around the big table doing his usual political glad handing and giving everybody a pat on the back or a high five in his best possible political style. Of course, the American president was the star among all the heads of state; everybody wanted to meet him and shake his hand, especially since the media was still in the room taking pictures. As he got to the Belarus seat, Lukashenko got up and they looked at each other and then gave each other a big bear hug. I'm sure Clinton had no idea who he was hugging, thinking it was just another one of these Eastern European leaders he had to be nice and friendly to. The American delegation was absolutely mortified. I never saw the Minsk newspapers the next day, but I'd be surprised if they didn't carry a photo of the bear hug.

Q: Well Peter, this is a good place to stop. And I want to thank you very much. Just recently what have you done since?

EICHER: After I left ODIHR I thought I would look for other work but what happened was that after I had been gone about a month or so, I got a call from them saying how would you like to come back and head one of our election observation missions? And I said, "Well, you know, I supervised these from Warsaw for a long time. I've been on a lot of them and they're great fun and they are important but I'm not sure that I would really like to actually spend six weeks in the field heading one." And they said, "Well, you know, if you would give it a try, the one we had in mind was the Czech Republic and you would have to go to Prague in the springtime and spend six weeks there." So I thought for a moment and said, "Well, okay. I'll give it a try." So I went off and headed the election mission to the Czech Republic and ended up liking it so much that it became sort of a career. Over the next four or five years, I headed a dozen different election observations for the OSCE in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Spain, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Bosnia, Turkey and other countries. It was just a truly fascinating experience. Each time you are sort of dropped into a new place and you are right in the middle of the biggest political event going on in the country. You meet all the big leaders, follow all of the exciting political campaign developments and issue your judgment on the extent to which the election met international standards, often with a lot of press play. So I slowly became an election specialist as a result of that.

Elections are really a human rights issue, in essence. And I've found that they are one of the most challenging human rights issues, because they center on who will be in power. So, while I found in my earlier experiences that even dictators or repressive regimes can be open to cooperation on some human rights issues, many of them draw the line at anything that could interfere with their hold on power, like a free election. So, interestingly, some of the states that are supposedly doing well in other aspects of democratization and human rights continue to have bad elections. Each election mission is a long story in itself. I could go on for hours about them, but I guess that's beyond the scope of this exercise.

When I wasn't away on election missions, I continued to work for the ODIHR on contracts to write or edit handbooks or reports on human rights. I've found that interesting, since it draws on all I've learned over the past decade. I've written handbooks on individual human rights complaints, on election monitoring, and on women and elections, and I've contributed to many more, on combating trafficking or human rights and terrorism, or other subjects.

After a few years I started to branch out from the ODIHR. I had an offer from the UN to come work in their election office for a year, which I did. I was team leader for the Iraq elections and referendum of late 2005. That led to some more UN work, including heading a team to Bangladesh. In fact, I've done about five UN missions to Bangladesh now for elections; that's a story in itself. I've also done UN election missions to Turkmenistan and Maldives. I've worked on contract also for half a dozen other organizations. I went and trained election judges in Bahrain for the American Bar Association. I did a little project for the Australian Election Commission. When I was in Russia, I worked on a project for the Norwegian Refugee Council on internally displaced persons in the northern Caucasus. I've helped a couple of other NGOs with their projects. I've also been on several election missions for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, to Georgia and Kazakhstan, and twice to Ukraine. All of these would be interesting stories, in their own way. So, I've kept busy, and I've found that there is interesting life outside the Foreign Service, which, I guess, can be a revelation to those of us who spent our careers in the Service.

Q: Time seems to be running out. What was your impression of the Iraq elections?

EICHER: It was a very mixed impression. If I had been an election observer, as I have spent so much of the past years doing, I would have been very critical. After all, you couldn't possibly have a fair and free election in the kind of circumstances you had in Iraq. In other countries, we're critical if there are any violent incidents; if a candidate is killed, it's a major black mark against the election. In Iraq, candidates and party activists were getting killed all over the place. All kinds of people who might have wanted to be candidates or activists were locked up without charges. A major party had been banned. There was violence everywhere. There were no election observers because it wasn't safe enough. There was no security for free speech or free campaigning or free movement or all the things you need in a good election. So certainly it was not the kind of election process that met international standards.

On the other hand, you had to give the Iraqis a lot of credit for being able to do as much as they did under the circumstances. Even to be able to set up an administrative structure that enabled people to go out and cast a ballot was quite a remarkable achievement. Iraqi citizens showed a lot of bravery and determination in going out to vote. You could make a good argument that even severely flawed elections were better than no elections, since the alternatives were either continued administration by the foreign occupation forces or the appointmenrather than electioof Iraqi leaders. And, for all the faults of these elections, you might say that they were better than previous Iraqi elections, where Saddam Hussein regularly got 99 percent of the vote.

So, all in all, under the circumstances, the process was not entirely unreasonable. It was an election that fell way short of international standards. As for the referendum on the constitution, I'm not entirely convinced that the final outcome was as it was announced, that is, there may have been enough fiddling around with results that the constitution which was adopted may actually not have been legitimately passed by the voters. We just didn't have enough evidence to say that the results were wrong. There were no observers out in the field to give an independent view. The election couldn't have happened without UN assistance, but on the ground, at the polling stations and counting centers, it was run by Iraqis and there were not even UN personnel there to check on how the process was conducted.

All in all, I think the Iraqi elections were a positive thing. I agreed to work on them even though I was strongly opposed to the invasion of Iraq and the U.S. position on Iraq. The fact was that there was a mess in Iraq that had every prospect of getting even worse. Under the circumstances, I believed that elections were better than no elections and that if there were going to be elections they should be a good as possible. At best, there might be a chance to nudge Iraq towards democracy or something like it. Overall, it seemed to me that elections would be more likely to make the situation better than worse; that they might help move the country towards peace and reconciliation, as well as help get the U.S. out. So, I saw the elections I was working on as an honest effort to try to make the best of a bad situation. I think it did help, at least to some extent. One thing I've certainly learnel guess I knew it even before getting involved in Iraq, but Iraq reinforced it for mis that elections don't make a democracy. Elections are only one step and there are a lot of other things that need to be done before elections can have the kind of effect you want them to.

Q: All right. Thank you very much.

End of interview