Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR ALPHONSE F. LA PORTA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview dates: February 11, 2004

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Q: Today is February 11th, 2004. This is an interview with Alphonse La Porta. Is there a middle initial?

LA PORTA: F.

Q: F. All right. You go by Al?

LA PORTA: Al, right.

Q: Okay. Well, let's sort of start at the beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born and then we'll start talking about your family.

LA PORTA: Okay, I was born January 15, 1939 in Brooklyn, New York, Bushwick Hospital to be exact, but my family moved to Long Island when I was a few months old. So, I grew up basically on the south shore of Long Island. My father was a hairdresser. He had also worked as a barber. My mother had also been a hairdresser at one time although she did not work at all once she married my father. My father's family were first generation immigrants to the United States making my father second generation and I'm third. My mother's family was from the Ukraine and they were first generation immigrants as well, but they lived in Pennsylvania.

Q: Okay, let's take your father. Let's go back to the father's side and then we'll go to the mother's side. Where did the La Portas come from, your grandparents and on that side?

LA PORTA: The La Porta side of the family basically came from one small part of Sicily, Agrigento on the south coast of Sicily.

Q: Important ruins there.

LA PORTA: Right, Greek and other ruins. The family was basically very typical of immigrants at about 1890, 1895. They were landless or they were living on marginal land. Sicily was nowhere developed in the way it is today obviously and the impetus was to get out and live somewhere else. My grandfather's older brother was the first to migrate to the United States and, as was typical, he saved money and sent money back to the family in Italy and then subsequent siblings migrated to the States.

Q: What did your grandfather do?

LA PORTA: My grandfather was a hairdresser. When he started out, he learned the barbering trade and when he first came to the U.S. he was a barber on a cruise ship which is an interesting occupation in the 1920's.

Q: That would probably have been fairly lucrative you know in that trade. Had the family sort of settled in Brooklyn?

LA PORTA: They all settled in New York. My father went to James Madison High School in Manhattan. The family for a while lived in Manhattan and bought a home in Brooklyn in Coney Island. Then my grandfather relocated his business, his beauty shop out to Long Island and my father worked for a department storBest & Co. as a hairdresser. Then, later on, he right after the war, he started his own shop in Garden City, Long Island and continued that until he died.

Q: On your mother's side, Ukraine, where did they come from?

LA PORTA: Well, they had a very interesting background. Unfortunately in our family we know very little about them and in fact my mother and her siblings knew relatively little about the family's origins. They were very poor people from Galicia, which is in the western Ukraine an area that was traded off between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russians and the Poles. In fact her family had two names. Their Slavic name was Kuzemchak and the German name was Kuzenbach. But they found their way to central Pennsylvania and my grandfather worked in the coalmines. That was a typical occupation of people who came from central Europe in that period.

Q: Oh, yes. Well, how did your mother and family get together?

LA PORTA: Well, it was a sad tale in a way because my mother's father died when she was about 11 years old of black lung disease and her mother died when she was 15. They lived in a little town in PennsylvaniKulemont near Shamokiand they had one sister who migrated to the big city to find work. My mother took care of two siblings, younger girls, and when her mother passed on they all moved to New York City. She started work as a hairdresser's assistant in Manhattan and that's how she met my father.

Q: Did your mother get through high school?

LA PORTA: No, we used to chide her that she was a functional literate as opposed to a functional illiterate. She finished 8th grade in school and she didn't go beyond that. My father had a high school education and I was the first in my family to have a college education.

Q: This is so often what happens I must say. The cohort that I'm dealing with now, my parents didn't graduate from college, you know and this is very typical in the Foreign Service. Today I guess both parents have a master's degree or something I don't know. Anyway, do you have brothers and sisters?

LA PORTA: Well, I have, I had two sisters. One passed away in 1978 and the other one still lives in Manhattan.

Q: Where would you call home as a kid when you grew up?

LA PORTA: We lived in a kind of circumscribed suburban area on the south side of Long Island. My grandparents moved to a town called Oceanside. My parents bought their first house in Oceanside and later, when my second sister came along, we needed a larger house so we moved to Lynbrook. Now Lynbrook is only of passing interest as a place where the Long Island railroad branches out; the rail line splits there going to Long Beach and the Eastern Long Island line going out to the south shore. If there are any devotees of the "I Love Raymond" TV show out there, it supposedly takes place in Lynbrook.

Q: Lynbrook is kind of what you call home?

LA PORTA: I call Lynbrook home. It is a bedroom community although I went all through school in the neighboring school district, so I'm a graduate of Malverne High School.

Q: One thinks of New York City as having these sort of ethnic enclaves. Was this an ethnic enclave or was this a pretty mixed place?

LA PORTA: It was very heterogeneous. In fact it was remarkable I think in hindsight how heterogeneous it was. We just kind of accepted it. I would say that probably that area of the south shore during the time I was growing up, might have been 20% to 30% Jewish. Many were recent immigrants or second generation, and most of the others were kind of mixed WASPish (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) as well as other immigrant groups. For example, I had one college, high school classmate who was the daughter of Finnish immigrants and another one was the daughter of Norwegian immigrants. It was kind of eclectic.

Q: In the first place, what was home life like? Your mother was at home all the time?

LA PORTA: My mother was home and she, as I said earlier, did not work at all until after my father passed away in 1985. She got a couple of part time jobs to get herself out of the house. My father after the war established his own beauty shops in Garden City, New York, which is kind of a well off, high rent district. So, much of what we did revolved around his work schedule which was fairly punishing. He left early in the morning and he would get home at 8:00 at night. That's the way business was in those days. I would not characterize us as being well off at all. I would say probably during my earlier years we were probably lower middle class if one puts a label on it. Later on my father, through business growth, investments and whatnot, became a little better off and had a comfortable semi-retirement for a few years before he passed away. He died at the age of 57 of lung cancer.

Q: Did you get involved or your sisters get involved in the work?

LA PORTA: Not at all. In fact it was interesting. My mother said, you will not have any part of your father's business. The epic of the family, and this was true of my grandparents as well, who said, no, your job is to assimilate, go to school, be smart and go do something else. In my father's mind's eye the status to which we should aspire was to get college degrees and then become teachers because that was a respected occupation among people of my parents' generation. I think also there was a very strong strain in our family of trying to overcome the Depression.

Q: I mean more than almost anything else was much worse than the war, the Depression had a lasting impact on families. Did the Sicilian background, was this something that, I mean, in the sense that Sicilians being very clannish and together and all that. Was this part of your experience or with a Ukrainian mother and all did this make it.

LA PORTA: Well, it was pretty much growing up we had some contact, closer than others depending on which one of my mother's siblings, but they did not have a strong family tradition on the Ukrainian side and I think it's primarily because the parents died when the children were so young. On my father's side, I would say they were certainly observant Italians, for comparison purposes having just served in southern Italy. My immediate past assignment just prior to retirement was in Naples, Italy. We visited Sicily and one can certainly see the mores and strong societal conduct of Southern Italian immigrants to the U.S. For example, for Sunday lunch you either take Grandma out to dinner or you go to Grandma's for dinner. So, every Sunday in Long Island we went to church (that was always a must) and then we went to my grandmother's and grandfather's house. Later on when my grandfather died and my grandmother came to live with us, everybody came to our house. You had that strong tradition among close relatives. Our family was not very large. My grandfather only had one brother and two sisters with whom we were close. The number of cousins was manageable. We would see a lot of the cousins.

The big thing in our family among my sisters and me was to assimilate and that was the pressure. Although for example my father's grandfather's English was perfect, my grandmother had very little English. They conversed in Italian. We never learned or were never taught Italian properly. Any Italian we assimilated was Sicilian dialect, so-called kitchen Italian. My father's Italian was not good. My father's brother's Italian was reasonably good, but then again it was the Sicilian dialect.

Q: Sicilian, right. As a kid, I guess World War II passed by before you were really able to feel many of the strain and really the post-war period. Were you picking up things at home?

LA PORTA: Well, yes and no. I think some of my earliest recollections are of wartime in a suburb of New York. As a kid of three or four years old we went out to the victory gardens. My family had one as the whole neighborhood did. We had rationing. We would go with my mother shopping and she'd have her ration books. I don't know how many people today might remember the kind of margarine you used to get because we didn't have any butter. The margarine came in a plastic bag with a little pill, you broke the pill and then you squeezed the bag in order to color the margarine to look like butter. That was the greatest fun that we had.

Q: I remember that the kids loved it, but the parents. It came out as a pasty white. I think this was designed because the butter interest in Wisconsin and maybe in Vermont to force you to do this so they couldn't color margarine.

LA PORTA: That's correct.

Q: Until it got to the consumer.

LA PORTA: If my recollection serves me, we didn't have colored margarine until probably '49 or '50 and that the big thing was Blue Bonnet brand margarine. It's funny how those things react on you. I remember VE Day and I do remember on VJ Day we had block parties to celebrate. We had a neighbor next door to us who was in the army. My father was exempt because he had more than two children and he worked in the Grumman aircraft factory. His brother also worked at Grumman Aviation. Although the war years were not great, my father and my uncle were at least earning a salary so they were doing quite well.

Q: Around sort of the Sunday dinner table or something as you grew up, were politics or international relations or what were the conversations about do you recall with the family or were they just sort of family?

LA PORTA: Well, I think the times were conditioned by the war and certainly by all the momentous things in the immediate post-war period. My parents and grandfather did not like to talk about the Depression and they were in that respect very forward looking people. They didn't want to deal with what the past, and frankly they didn't talk an awful lot about their families and what it was like during the times that they were growing up. Consequently I think the war was very much on everybody's agenda including the visceral dislike of Germans, Hitler, Japan. Even our neighbors who were Pennsylvania Dutch Germans with relatives in Germany probably had a few hard moments as well. We had a few relatives who were in the war and fortunately all of them came back. I think that most of the conversation was on the news of the day, what we heard on the radio and saw in the newsreels in the movies. We had a very international outlook in that respect I guess you'd say.

Q: Where did your family fit politically?

LA PORTA: My father was for the time very conservative and he was a Republican. Now, saying that about New York in the '40s and '50s would mark him as very much as a moderate these days, as a so-called Rockefeller Republicanism is a dying breed. My mother had no particular politics at all but most of the people we knew were very supportive of the Republicans. We had a county judge who lived two doors down and he was a Republican. In New York your judges are elected and they are elected on basis of party and that's where your loyalties were. The Nassau County machine then, as it is today, was solidly Republican.

Q: How about the big city? Did the big city intrude or not?

LA PORTA: The big city was always a kick for us kids. My father and mother disliked going to Manhattan so much that we just basically went to visit relatives. On those few occasions we did, it was usually for a school trip to a museum. But my mother did like to go to Radio City Music Hall to see the Rockettes and the big show. About once a year she took us at Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter to Radio City Music Hall. You had to take the Long Island Railroad which was expensive at that time even at 1940s prices. My father had a distinct dislike for driving into Manhattan. It wasn't later until I really was in graduate school in 1960-61 that I really got to appreciate Manhattan.

Q: School. You went through school in Lynbrook was it?

LA PORTA: We were in the Malverne school district because our part of town fell into the neighboring school district. Five blocks away we had an elementary school, Davison Avenue Elementary School, and then I went through Malverne Junior High School and Malverne High School. It was a six year elementary school. I think I can probably remember most of my teachers and it was a good and humane place.

Q: What was the school like and what subjects were you interested in?

LA PORTA: Well, I had trouble with math and I kind of liked science, but I never did all that well at it. Maybe that says something about the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, I was going to say, welcome to the club.

LA PORTA: I remember, apart from the rigors of getting through arithmetic and so forth, there were a lot of very dedicated long time teachers there. There was stability not only in personal terms, but in the community, and my sisters had the same teachers that I did. The teachers were well known. Everyone in the community went to the school open houses. Everyone talked to the teachers and that was something that was very just in contrast from urban life today where people look to the schools as a place to park their kids.

Q: Well, the teachers were mostly women, weren't they at that time? In the elementary school.

LA PORTA: In the elementary school yes. In the high school we had a number of men teaching who were, I would say, uniformly outstanding.

Q: All right, well, let's stick to elementary school to begin with. Any teachers that struck you as being particularly influential or ones that you remember?

LA PORTA: Maybe it's the toughest ones and the ones who are the least attractive. I remember my first grade teacher, Mrs. Gray and my third grade teacher, Miss Bassett, both caring people. Miss Bassett was a real bear on discipline. My sixth grade teacher, Miss Schecter, was the youngest teacher in the school and everybody liked her because you could really relate to her. She might have been a year or two out of college. I think, though, that the main things that stick out in my mind are the fact that you had people in the school who cared. School was the center of life. I went to Boy Scouts there, people did things together, and they had standards. They knew what they were about and if you weren't performing or didn't do well, as I didn't do well in math, well, you had extra work or remedial work or you got a tutor which I had to have on a couple of occasions.

Q: How about reading? Were you much of a reader?

LA PORTA: Yes, a whole lot. Maybe not as much as my sister, the older of my two sisters. She was three years younger than I, but we liked to read. We didn't have a lot of money to go out and spend on books, but we were always reading something.

Q: Was there a Carnegie library or equivalent nearby?

LA PORTA: Yes, we had a good public library, which was some distance away. Although it was in Lynbrook, it was a little difficult to get there. All of us found things to read.

Q: What sort of things were you particularly interested in?

LA PORTA: I recall all of the boy themes, the adventure themes.

Q: Tom Swift?

LA PORTA: That, Rudyard Kipling, a lot of the sea adventures that are now being made or remade into movies, the Scarlet Pimpernel, Ivanhoe and so forth. Later on my interest really was more in history. I mean by the time I was in the 5th and 6th grade I was reading a lot of simplified history.

Q: Was it junior high and high, was there a junior high?

LA PORTA: The junior high and high school were in the same building, but they were administered a little bit differently. My junior high years I remember as fairly lackluster. I learned to play the clarinet. I was in the marching band as well as in the little orchestra the school had. I liked that. My clarinet teacher was a Mr. Moody. He was quite a good musician. I don't know how he made a living teaching kids how to play musical instruments, but he did. Apart from that nothing terribly much stands out in my memory about junior high school as an experience. The real rite of passage was into the 9th grade, which was then considered senior high school. I think that that's when things began to take a lot more shape at least for me personally. I was very fortunate and I still do give credit publicly to my 10th grade history teacher, his name was Wilmot DeGrath, for having said to me, "Well, why don't you get interested in diplomatic service? You're good in international relations." He was my career counselor.

Q: Were you looking at history beyond the United States?

LA PORTA: Yes. 10th grade was World History. Eleventh grade was Government and International Relations. Twelfth grade was American History because you had to stress American History for the New York State Regents exam. Everything was dictated by the standard curriculum, but I will have to say that those were the formative years in terms of where I was eventually going.

Q: How about languages? Were you exposed to any languages?

LA PORTA: Yes, I was. In those times you didn't get foreign language until you went to high school. I had four years of Latin and two years of French. We had the archetypal Latin teacher. Her name was Miss Pendleton. She was about as thin as a pencil. She was a model of rectitude, discipline and everything that one expects in a Latin teacher. She was a superb teacher. If she kept you for four years that was pretty good I guess. One thing that was interesting about the Latin experience is that by the time you got to the third year you were reading about the Punic wars and the Roman civilization. You were translating essays by Cicero. That was an important intellectual challenge at least for a public high school kid.

Q: Speaking of Latin, how important was the Catholic Church in your upbringing?

LA PORTA: It was not at all because we weren't Catholic.

Q: Oh, okay. Good heavens, how did that come about?

LA PORTA: It's an interesting story. In fact my grandparents, of course being Sicilian, were Roman Catholics. My grandfather's attachment to Roman Catholicism was cut short because in the late '20s and early '30s the Pope conducted a program against Masons. I'm not exactly sure when this occurred, but around the time of the First World War he became a Mason. He was a 33rd degree Scottish Rite Mason and the only one in our family. My father and I and my uncle did not pursue that. He left the Catholic Church at that time. My parents were married, if I have this right, in 1935. They were married in the Catholic Church because that was the only place they knew to go, but growing up we never practiced as Catholics. We went to a church called the Windsor Avenue Bible Church, which is a church that my grandparents chose. It was near their house and it was a non-affiliated fundamentalist Christian church. It was a very big part of my life, and I think my sisters' lives as well, in social terms as well as a religious experience but I would say my sisters had less success with church-going than I did. So I was brought up a Protestant. As I said earlier every Sunday was church and I used to go to youth group one night during the week.

Q: Activities in high school. Band, were there any other ones?

LA PORTA: Right, I ran track for a while and was manager of the track team. I did not play football or baseball, did not wrestle, but that was about the extent of it. I was part of the theatrical group and that had a lot of spin offs much later. Those were probably my main activities.

Q: How about girls?

LA PORTA: There were a lot of girls all over the place.

Q: Yes, but I'm talking about I was wondering if you were dating?

LA PORTA: Formal dating I don't think really occurred until about maybe the 10th grade and I think the 11th grade I dated one girl who was a grade ahead of me. Then in my 11th grade I was her date for the senior prom. There were a couple of others that I went out with, but certainly nothing approximating in today's fixations with the opposite sex and social life.

Q: Did you have jobs during the summer or for after school hours?

LA PORTA: As soon as I was about 14, my father said I think it's a good thing for you to find a part time job. I did and I delivered prescriptions on bicycle for a drug store. Then I graduated to be the soda clerk and cashier.

Q: Soda jerk, wasn't it?

LA PORTA: Jerk and clerk and whatever, so you were running between the cash register and soda fountain. It was something that we did after school and evenings and was just simply very typical of our community. During the summers I had an opportunity through a relative of my aunt's to go to Saranac Lake in upstate New York where there was a very venerable old inn called Saranac Inn. In the Adirondacks, it had the status of the Greenbrier.

Q: Oh, yes. I've heard of Saranac.

LA PORTA: It was an absolutely fantastic place and was on a lake and I was a caddy there for two years. Then I graduated another summer to be a bus boy working in the hotel. We would take the long train ride to Malone, New York from New York City and then come back around Labor Day.

Q: Did you have any free time? Did you get out and enjoy the Adirondacks at all?

LA PORTA: Well, to some extent because you always were working while other people were not. I'd say life as a caddy was a heck of a lot easier than life in the kitchens and the main hotel. Because in the hotel even as a bus boy you had to work, start off at 6:00 AM for room service and then you finished up at 10:00 at night. As a caddy of course you finished at dusk but we had a curfew in the caddy dormitory. You had most of the evening to just horse around because there wasn't terribly much to do other than to go for a swim. You got your meals paid and then they had a couple of little employee clubs but you couldn't drink. New York State was still very strict on those things. The clubs were in small bungalows, not unlike this one (the ADST building).

Q: 1920 prefab cottage?

LA PORTA: It was like that. Many of us younger caddies used to like to go to the black employees' club because it was more fun than to go where the white employees hung out.

Q: That type of club thing was quite different from the Poconos and sort of the borscht circuit wasn't it? One always thinks of so much of show business came out of, sort of, I guess it was in the Poconos.

LA PORTA: In the Adirondacks there were many closed communities, not only the hotels which were public and open. This included Saranac and Lake Placid, but the clientele there was almost entirely WASP. By and large the people were money people, golf players, mostly professional or business. Very rarely did one see ethnics or anybody else of another persuasion.

Q: Well, we were very much a split society in those days.

LA PORTA: The borscht circuit was ethnic New York, generally Italian, German or Jewish.

Q: Yes. By the time you graduated in what year?

LA PORTA: I graduated in 1956.

Q: Your family was pointing you towards and your sisters towards college or not?

LA PORTA: Yes, I think it was always a given that we would go to college. This was a great deal of angst and not a little bit of conflict between me and my father, in terms of where to go to school, the cost, and so forth. I think that his firm idea was that I should go to public college. One of the state teachers colleges which are all large universities. There was the Albany State Teachers College where my sister went to school. My other sister, the youngest sister, went to Queens College, again a public institution. We had Stony Brook College on eastern Long Island, but upstate for elementary education there was New Paltz Teachers College. If you wanted to teach music you went to Oswego or Oneonta. If you really wanted to go far from home you went to Buffalo, but nobody wanted to do that because it was cold.

Q: Yes, that's right up in the Snow Belt.

LA PORTA: Right. Along about the 11th grade, I said, this idea of studying for the Foreign Service and doing international relations sounded to me to be a dandy idea. My father couldn't get the hang of it because he couldn't figure out why anybody would want to go to someplace called Washington, DC. Georgetown was the school of choice at that time as the American University school of international service didn't exist. If you weren't an Ivy Leaguer, the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown was the icon in the business. I applied to Georgetown and I got in, maybe to my parents' surprise, and then my father said, well, how are you going to pay for this. This is a private institution and it required real dollars. After a little head butting over how all this was going to happen, he said, "Well, look, I will pay your tuition, but you have to work and earn money, either through a part time job or during the summer, and pay for your upkeep." That's basically the bargain that we had. I will have to say in all fairness that my father probably could not afford the whole nine yards. As it turned out, in my sophomore year, I got a partial scholarship, then I had a work-study scholarships in my junior and senior years so I was able to get by.

Q: So, you were at Georgetown from when '56 to '60?

LA PORTA: That's exactly right.

Q: What was Georgetown like in 1956 when you went there?

LA PORTA: It was very buttoned up and very straight by today's standards. It was still very much of a Catholic school, which again did not exactly please my father. The Jesuits were some kind of remote and not-so-benign presence in some people's minds. I think the main hallmarks of Georgetown's administration during those days were they turned out good young men, emphasis on the men. We had women in the School of Foreign Service, but no women in the School of Arts and Sciences at that time. You were required to wear a coat and tie, so a blazer, white shirt and tie were what you wore for class every day. There was a lot of emphasis on decorum in the classroom. People did not act out. It was not a casual experience.

My first year I lived in the dormitory, Ryan Hall, and I think that we had the better of it because our Hall prefect was a Jesuit brother studying for the priesthood, Father Ambrosio who ran a pretty lenient regime. I had the corner room overlooking the Potomac, which was quite nice with a roommate. It was certainly a very different experience for a public school kid from not a rich community on Long Island. Washington, DC at the time was half segregated. There were still the poverty pockets of the black community including in Georgetown. Some of the small alleys in-between the main streets were for tiny houses originally built for freed slaves of the rich people, mainly during the antebellum time. In the mid-50's there were a lot of strong feeling about the still-incipient civil rights movement. People in Washington were not convinced that desegregation was the way to go.

My sophomore year I lived on the corner of 35th and O Streets. My landlord was down-deep, dyed-in-the-wool Southern Virginian from Petersburg who didn't believe in desegregation. He was a cab driver. But he was a wonderful man and there are still one or two cabbies today who remember him. When I get a cabbie of the right generation, I ask him whether he knew Garland Taylor who worked for Bell Cab. At that time, even a lower middle class taxi driver could live and own his own house in Georgetown. In the 1930's Depression, Georgetown was a poverty pocket across the board for whites and blacks. You had a lot of contrast. Beginning in the 1950's, the new bureaucratic class and the old rich came in to Georgetown and gentrified a lot of the houses. That process continues to this day but you also had blacks living in the traditional Georgetown houses along with the people who moved in after World War I and survived the Depression who were basically not well off whites. It was a very interesting kind of social mix.

Also, that extended to the religious side because there were a lot of barriers for Catholics at the time. If you went to Holy Trinity, you were in a Jesuit parish; although it was not affiliated with the university, you were kind of marked as being a "Jesuit" by people in other parishes. Interestingly I got involved during my freshman year with a group of Protestants. At Georgetown if you were a Catholic you had to take two years of theology. Non-Catholics were exempt from that, but we had to take two years of political science and frankly they were some of the best courses I've ever taken. So, a small group of us non-Catholicthere were five or six of ustarted a little informal club. We didn't call ourselves anything, but we just went around to different non-Catholic churches all over town just to check them out. One Sunday we'd go to the Episcopal Church. There was one fellow who was a day student whose family attended First Baptist Church down on 16th Street, so we went there as well as to the Presbyterian Church. It was interesting and a good exercise in comparative Protestant faiths.

The Catholic, non-Catholic divide, was really only reflected in whether you took theology or didn't take theology, that was just for two years. Everybody also had to take two years of philosophy. If you didn't take Thomas Aquinas in theology class you got him in philosophy class. But that was one of the most valuable experiences that I had in academic terms at Georgetown as an undergraduate. On the whole Washington was interesting, but maybe less interesting then than it is today. You had the museums, but they were just relatively modest in those times. It was before the expansion of the National Gallery, before the Smithsonian and so forth. I remember the opening of the Museum of History and Technology, which was the first new building at the Smithsonian.

Q: It's now called the Museum of American History I think, isn't it?

LA PORTA: Yes.

Q: It started out as History and Technology.

LA PORTA: Right, but that was a big thing and I think that occurred in about 1957 or 1958 and that was the first new museum to be built on the mall in almost 30 years. As a Georgetown student, however, you didn't engage that much with the community. Where you were was socializing with your peers. A lot of walking around Georgetown, that was your natural community. After you were finished studying about midnight, there was a Britt's Cafeteria on lower Wisconsin Avenue right near the Riggs Bank; I don't know what's there now, but that used to open at midnight. All the cabbies, all the drunks, all the people who were getting off shift and Georgetown students used to go there for coffee and breakfast.

Q: In courses, the school of Foreign Service was run by Father?

LA PORTA: Fadner.

Q: Did you really feel separate from the rest of the university?

LA PORTA: Actually yes, because I think there was something of a social divide or at least a small fault line between the School of Foreign Service and the School of Business, which was our sister institution, and the College of Arts and Sciences. First of all, all of the college of arts and sciences students were required to live in the dormitories all four years, we were not. Secondly, they were all men. Our school was coed, although we may have had 20 women out of the total class of about 190 at that time. The other thing that separated us was that we had night classes and we had night students. Some of my very good friends were veterans. They'd been in World War II or they had been in the Korean War and came to Georgetown to go to school and get a degree at night.

We had a lot more of what I would call social mobility in our day-to-day contacts than they did in the College of Arts and Sciences. The College of Arts and Sciences also tended to be rich kids. We always thought they were pampered and urbane and not a few homosexuals among them. One of them interestingly lived in the dorm across the hall from me in my freshman year was John Guare who is now an extremely successful playwright. A lot of the kids in the College of Arts and Sciences, probably most of them, had come out of boarding schools and in terms of social standing were a cut above. They were the kind that went up to the Lester Lanin dances at the Roosevelt Hotel at Thanksgiving time and all that.

Q: What sort of courses were you taking? How did that work?

LA PORTA: Father Fadner was the dean of the School of Foreign Service. He succeeded Father Walsh who was the founder of the School of Foreign Service. Fadner was a Russianologist. He was a professor of Russian history and government. All through my undergraduate career the curriculum was foreordained. It was printed: You will take... For the first two years everything you had was a required course. You had no wiggle room except you were assigned to section A or section B in which you might have had different professors or you could choose to take a night course instead of the day course if it were better for your schedule. That introduced a little bit of variety so you could go at 6:00 to 8:00 in the evening or 7:00 to 9:00 if it fit and you could take the same course at night. I did that sometimes in order to just carve more time out of the afternoon for the magazine I edited or other projects. I also had four years of ROTC on top of the basic academic program. It wasn't until the junior year that we got to have electives and our senior year we got to have seminars. It was very regimented in that respect. Looking back on it, it wasn't all bad because they knew what they were doing. They made sure that they had all the building blocks in there, including language, and you had to have two years of language at least. You had to have so many years of history, government and whatever. The only thing you didn't have was math, thank God, or science, although some people did get permission to take science courses over in the College of Arts and Sciences if they were interested.

Q: Languages?

LA PORTA: I took French and that I did for two years and that was what the requirement was. That was okay. Every semester you had an economics course. Every semester you had a government course of some kind and then later on you got into junior year we had international law. In fact my international law professor William V. O'Brien, died just a few months ago. He was a brilliant guy, just fantastic, as a professor as well as a human being. I think that the School of Foreign Service achieved what they set out to do which was to train people. They weren't educating you in the Socratic sense and they certainly weren't casting pearls before swine. They expected you to measure up and to march through the curriculum. There was very little tolerance of other things, and certainly no liberal or freethinking.

Q: How much did, you know, Georgetown being in Washington, how much did the Washington scene, this was the Eisenhower, the second Eisenhower term, how much did that impact on you all?

LA PORTA: Hard to say. In my view, when I became a senior we used to go down and get cheap seats at Constitution Hall where the National Symphony Orchestra played at that time. We used to go down to the National Theater now and then. Being in the city (there was no Beltway at the time, but being inside the not yet existing Beltway) did not have much meaning in terms of becoming a political junkie or how you thought about things as compared to today. We had politics at Georgetown and there was a divide between the Democratic minority and mainstream Republicanism. It looked more like Rockefellerism from New York as opposed to something more conservative.

Q: Did you continue sort of in the Rockefeller Republican side of things?

LA PORTA: I did. There was a row over Barry Goldwater and it was about that time in my senior year that Young Americans for Freedom was founded. The YAF decided it was going to take over student governments around the country to propagate Goldwater conservatism. A group of less conservative Republicans decided we would resist that and we opposed their hijacking the Republican club and the student government. A group of us teamed up and we successfully put forward our own candidate for head of the student government against a co-student named Douglas Caddy who was later to reappear briefly during Watergate as one of the Nixon's lawyers. Also one of the leading conservative Republicans on campus was Bob Bauman who was a student intern in Joe McCarthy's office. Later on he ran for Congress from the Eastern Shore of Maryland but was ousted from congress because of a sexual peccadillo. This was back in I guess the mid '70s. So there was some political stress appearing in campus life. I gravitated in my own circles. I worked on the yearbook and I became editor of the school magazine, the Foreign Service Courier. We didn't have a newspaper in the school of Foreign Service. The College of Arts and Sciences had a weekly newspaper. The Courier looked like State Magazine used to before it got lots of color and fancy photos, but we attempted to not only to report on student news in the Business school and Foreign Service school and Institute of Languages, but we also had writings on serious subjects, not unlike AFSA's (American Foreign Service Association) the Foreign Service Journal.

Q: In the school of Foreign Service, didn't the State Department Foreign Service and foreign affairs agencies intrude on your life?

LA PORTA: To some extent, but I think that the media impact was much less than it might have been. You never saw anybody coming around saying they were from the State Department. The ones who came around were CIA recruiters. The State Department recruiters weren't interesting. Occasionally we had lecturers. We invited people from various parts of State to come and the school had a lecture series so every couple of months there was some significant person who came to talk. Where you got your energy in those days were other students who were doing other things. For example, we had students working on degrees who came out of Hill staffs. We had students who had been in the military and we had a lot of intellectual ferment among your peers and activities pretty much centered on campus.

We had one group, we didn't call it an international relations club, which visited different embassies every couple of months. The ambassador would invite you to his embassy to give a talk about country X. I remember going to the Republic of China residence which was then a very grand one up off Wisconsin Avenue. I think it's the International School of Washington now. Wellington Koo was the ambassador. So, we had things like that, but I would say that by and large you were there to be trained. You were there to at the end of your senior year you're going to take the Foreign Service examination because that's what everybody did. Only a small number of our colleagues came into the Foreign Service as it turned out. Some of my good friends at that time were Joe Yodzis who graduated a year ahead of me. Ed Djerejian who earned current fame for his study on public diplomacy and now is working with the James Baker Center for Public Policy in Houston is probably the most distinguished Foreign Service graduate from my class certainly. We had a few others who went into Commerce Department, a few into CIA, but it was by no means the majority of the class.

Q: You mentioned work, you had to get work to keep going.

LA PORTA: Right.

Q: What sort of work were you doing?

LA PORTA: In my junior and senior year I had a partial scholarship because I was the editor of the magazine. During the year so I spent most afternoons and a lot of weekends doing the magazine, everything from writing to layout to getting it published. One summer I went to work for the Public Housing Administration. I applied for a clerical job and I got it. I worked at New Hampshire and Connecticut Avenues. I was a GS-3 clerk-typist there and I worked into the school year in that job. Then in my junior and senior years I had ROTC summer camp. ROTC had summer camp every year so that took a chunk out of your summer. By and large working while going to school was not as big a thing as it might have been. It was something you did just to earn money.

Q: Were you and maybe some of your colleagues pointed toward the Foreign Service written exam and all?

LA PORTA: Well, yes and no. There were some study guides and sample examinations. One of the professors who taught diplomatic and consular practice, it was called dip and con, did have some meetings and we took the samples of the written examination at night. It wasn't a major focus and there weren't that many of us doing that. Most of the other people were either going to do something else if they were going to look at government. One of my classmates became the senior civil servant in the Commodities Future Trading Commission, CFTC. I think that has gone out of existence now or become something else. We had people lined up in the Treasury Department and other places. So, it wasn't that everyone was pointing to the Foreign Service. As I said, it was only maybe a dozen of us who looked forward to Foreign Service professional careers. One very good friend just retired from 35 years at the CIA and he has been teaching Latin American history and politics at Georgetown since he graduated.

Q: Did politics intrude on, did you get involved in, in the first place, by the time you got to Georgetown, the McCarthy period was basically over, but was there an aftermath of being a Catholic university and all. I would think it would be a conflicted place.

LA PORTA: Indeed it was. I mean while most of the university and certainly Father Fadner and a lot of our professors were quite conservative and were Republicans, we also had a few recent immigrants, like Brzezinski who was a visiting professor at Georgetown, and another Polish ï¿½migrï¿½ by the name of Jan Karski teaching government. I think overall there was a very strong reaction against McCarthyism and kind of the conservative agenda such as it was at that time. The effort was to get Goldwater into the White House. I think people were not admiring of the tactics and kind of attempts to hijack the student government, take over organizations for political purposes and so forth. I think they didn't succeed, although individually as I said earlier, a number of people involved went on to careers in conservative political life.

A number of my good friends got a big turnoff because of the political aspects and they eventually found their way into academia and became very non-political. Only a few found their way into the law. By and large it was very diffuse in terms of what transpired after Georgetown.

Q: Did Senator John F. Kennedy cross your radar at all?

LA PORTA: Oh, well, he lived right down there on 33rd and N Street and the oohs and the aahs, especially the girls, loved to go down and see if they could get a glimpse of Jackie and so forth. Madeleine Albright today lives on 34th Street. We're still in a good neighborhood. If you look at Georgetown today and what it was at that time, today you have a lot of diversity in the School of Foreign Service. You have very expansive graduate programs and continuing education. You have special degrees and certificate programs. Everything from theology to graduate business, MBA programs and things like that. You have a lot of Foreign Service people, including colleagues like Howie Schaffer, Dick Teare who is running the kind of Australian-New Zealand program and many people who are now back at Georgetown in different ways. They have really expanded the public affairs or public policy outreach to the university. In the 1950's there wasn't that much interface. There wasn't that much impact. Although you had certainly people who were well known experts, but they weren't heavily involved in politics and the administration of the day. There wasn't this turn of the wheel where all the Democratic academics went into the administration, then after eight years came back to the university and found a job. You certainly didn't have the impact of think tanks at that time. Academic institutions were fairly well constrained and self-contained.

Georgetown Law School, because it was located down near the Hill, perhaps had a bigger impact and provided a lot of law graduates who worked on congressional staffs. They had law school outplacement programs and internships. We didn't have that much.

Q: Georgetown, too had not made its big jump into going from being a very good Catholic university to being a very good sort of challenger to the Ivy League type of universities which came a little later. Am I right in that?

LA PORTA: I think that that was a deliberate change in the philosophy of the university. As a Catholic institution our peers were Fordham, Xavier, Holy Cross, etc. I mean very good top of the line Catholic schools. It wasn't until I think the late '60s that Georgetown began to live a whole lot more in the world.

Q: Father Healy I think came in didn't he?

LA PORTA: Father Healy I think that was probably right. Georgetown also began to swing some weight in the Catholic hierarchy in the city. They established a consortium of Catholic universities and they started to swap students around to Catholic University, Marymount and others who were expanding.

Q: Trinity I think.

LA PORTA: Trinity, yes Trinity College. You had different things begin to happen. I went back to Georgetown to graduate school in 1963-65 and I found that the student body was changing on the graduate level. We had a lot more students coming from other places in the U.S.

Q: In 1960 you graduated. What did you do?

LA PORTA: Well, I did what everybody else did. I took the Foreign Service exam. I passed the written exam and I failed the oral exam. I went to New York University. I lived at home. I decided to do a masters degree in history in two areas, American history and diplomatic history, the two things that I was really interested in, largely because of professors that I had at Georgetown. Dr. Jules Davids was a very superb diplomatic historian. I kind of got on that track and I said, well, I'm going to have to wait a while until I take the oral exam which didn't occur until sometime late or in the middle of the following year after I graduated.

Q: The oral exam was different times. The first week or Saturday in December.

LA PORTA: That's right. I graduated in June and it wasn't until the following summer that I could take the oral examination.

Q: Do you recall the oral exam, the one that you didn't pass?

LA PORTA: I do. I do indeed. The bottom line was they said, well, very nice, Mr. La Porta. We noticed you just graduated from Georgetown, why don't you come back when you get some experience.

Q: Well, this is often the case. Do you recall any of the questions?

LA PORTA: Not really. I do remember kind of the atmospherics surrounding the interview. It was three people, straight grilling. Q and A, Q and A. There was no attempt made at conversation. It was empirical knowledge. It was not well, how do you feel about .... There was no touchy-feely in that crowd. I took the examination in New York and I don't remember who the examiners were. I went to NYU and started my masters degree and I was able to work for the university. I worked in the bursar's office (the treasurer's office) and had a full time job. I went to school in the evening; then for one year at the same time I was a research assistant to a history professor.

Q: How did you find the atmosphere at NYU?

LA PORTA: Totally different from Georgetown. Students were still more polite and better dressed in those days even at NYU, but you had a totally a different mix of people because everybody was out doing something else and pursuing a graduate degree at night. History was not everybody's cup of tea. You didn't have a lot of dedicated core history students. You had about 20 that you traveled through different courses with. Of course NYU was a huge business school, a big medical school, all in downtown Manhattan and it was totally cosmopolitan. For the time it was great fun. It was about as much contrast as you could get from the Georgetown kind of straight and narrow. As I said I had some superb professors at NYU and that was a real treat. It was real intellectual growth.

Q: What did you family think, particularly your father, here you are back again going to school?

LA PORTA: Well, he didn't think too much of that, so it wasn't going to come out of his hide financially. I worked my way through. I bought a car from my uncle and I commuted into lower Manhattan. I had just finished my course work when they were calling people up for the second Berlin crisis. Although I had gotten a deferment from ROTC for my academic work, they said, you've got to come on active duty. So, I had to kind of hurry up and finish my thesis. Then I went into the army in September of '62.

Q: This was as a second lieutenant?

LA PORTA: Yes, second lieutenant.

Q: What branch?

LA PORTA: I was in army intelligence, but all intelligence officers had to take the army infantry officers' basic training. My first stop was Fort Benning, Georgia which was a real eye opener in many respects and then I went to Fort Holabird in Baltimore where I served out the rest of my time in the military for two years.

Q: This is the headquarters of?

LA PORTA: The army intelligence school. I really never left the army intelligence school although I went through their course basically to be the equivalent of a CIA case officer. Only a small number of our army class got real intelligence jobs and I stayed at the intelligence school to become the security officer there.

Q: How did you find the military?

LA PORTA: I liked it in a whole lot of ways. I probably would have stayed in the military if I had gotten a decent second assignment. I kept dealing with the detailers as assignment officers are called in Washington in army personnel. They'd come back and say, well, lieutenant, we really don't have anything in your field. I said, send me to Korea. Send me to you name it, any bad place you want to send me. They kept diddling and fiddling and I said, fine, I've got to make some plans here. I'm checking out. That was the end of it. I had two years in the military. I established some outstanding relationships among my colleagues. I got an army commendation medal and a few other commendations. It was experience after all. We had a great bunch of guys that I went through the officers training with and they're still friends of mine to this day. One of the things that the army taught me and having the ROTC experience is that I became very interested in POL/MIL work during my time in the Foreign Service. My last job as political advisor to the commander of NATO forces in Naples was a great job.

Q: This is one of the things, it's all from lacking today and that is so few of your junior officers, unless they had been military or had a military career and come in as a retired major of lieutenant colonel, but the rest just don't have that military experience and the feel of it.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. This is a very serious shortcoming in my view. Today about the most you'll get is a few reserve officers, maybe a few who were called up for Afghanistan and later for Iraq, and these guys do well in the Foreign Service. They're great Foreign Service Officers and great military officers. I do know that we also get a certain number of military brats, not a large number, but a few who are sons and daughters of military people who do decide they want to work on the civilian side. But it is no means proportionate to the numbers that we need considering the importance of working with the military and interfacing with DOD.

Q: I came in in '55 and my whole generation was almost all male and almost all veterans. Just nothing, it was just the way it was. You got out of the military when?

LA PORTA: 1963.

Q: Okay, then you went back to Georgetown, was it?

LA PORTA: I was studying for my Ph.D. doing my course work at Georgetown, but I went to work for NSA, the National Security Agency.

Q: All right, well, we'll pick this up the next time.

Today is the 25th of March, 2004. Al?

LA PORTA: I shortchanged you on some views on my university experience and graduate school. I think that there are a few things in there that I think that were relevant to my subsequent performance in the Foreign Service. In particular, I think that Catholic universities, whatever else they may be, do have a rather rigorous approach to intellectual development. The fact that you were required to take two years of philosophy and required to take an equivalent to theology and that you had a very strong emphasis in the School of Foreign Service on writing were truly instrumental in preparation for the Foreign Service. Where they might have done better at that time is in providing work-study experiences or internships or things to do in the summer. You were kind of always adrift, but it might have been a lot better had there been some professional things to do during the summer, as many universities now have internship requirements. Such programs help to fill experience gaps.

Q: Well, it was an era before they really developed that. I think now it has become more scheduled I think.

LA PORTA: My organization, the United States-Indonesia Society, USINDO, for example provides summer study programs for graduate school students to study language in Indonesia. We send them to Central Java for ten weeks and they live with an Indonesian family and are attached to the university there. On the other hand, I think that in terms of substantive preparation, Georgetown did have some truly outstanding professors at that time. Jules Davids was a professor of diplomatic history. He later published a first-rate diplomatic history in the 1970's. also there was J. Carroll Quigley, who was the notorious professor of a course called the development of civilizations that no one will ever forget. His book reputedly was one of Bill Clinton's favorites.

Q: A former president?

LA PORTA: Yes, that's right. He was Clinton's professor as well. Professor Bill O'Brien of international law and diplomatic practice was outstanding. There were people like Jan Karski who was a contemporary of Brzezinski's and a number of others on that level who were well-known. In graduate school I think I did mention I went to New York University. My two majors there were diplomatic history and contemporary American history since 1850. Two professors I had there, again, were remarkable as teachers and mentors. On the diplomatic history side, there was Vincent Carrosso, as good as Jules Davids at Georgetown. He did a lot of writing, mostly in modern European history. Also there was Bayrd Still who was a professor in social history, history of American west and history of American cities. What he conveyed was a very deep understanding of not only the official history of the United States, but also the process of becoming the ethos of America.

Q: The social forces.

LA PORTA: Exactly. Why we got to be where they are. Of course now universities have things like history of the American theater and films and whatnot which is pretty lightweight in contrast to the social undercurrents of the second half of the 19th Century and early 20th Century up through the Depression. There are some very powerful things to work with in terms of the Foreign Service experience.

Q: At New York University, I think of New York City as being a hotbed of European style socialism and all. How about European professors? Were they coming from anywhere in the political spectrum?

LA PORTA: Not necessarily. I think that even New York University at that time was fairly straight. You were certainly not propagandized as part of the student body. People left the free thinking to the New School of Social Research up the street on 5th Avenue and places like that. In fact, New York University in those years, this was of course before Vietnam and before we real activism set in, was a fairly steady place. I was a graduate teaching assistant, as well as a student and I also taught a couple of subjects in the school of business. I taught American history and American government because even as a business student you had to have a couple of social science credits. That was a pretty tough beat, trying to teach history to accounting students. Nevertheless, it was very interesting. As a native New Yorker, living on Long Island and commuting into Manhattan, turned me off on living in New York ever again.

Q: Well, I was wondering, the NSA, National Security Agency, which is essentially eavesdrops and goes after, listens in on things. What were you doing teaching area studies?

LA PORTA: Before the massive advances in technical intelligence you had a very heavy effort at NSA in traffic analysis that was done by humans and by hand and you worked off the printed word. You had transcripts of communications intercepts and a very large enterprise during those years of evaluating Soviet telemetry. Soviet telemetry was important because you analyze what happened around the Russian space program. Don't forget this was 1963, (Kennedy was shot while I was working at NSA in November of 1963) consequently you had a lot of people skills involved. Language skills, technical skills in terms of evaluating data and area studies were mandatory for people coming into the agency. Wherever you were working, you had a basic grounding in geography, history and current events, the structure of the Soviet government or the Chinese government, etc. My particular fields were Asian history, geography and religions because you also had to know something about Buddhism, Hinduism and other philosophies. That job consumed about a year.

Then I went into what was a very small unit in NSA that was responsible for liaison with foreign intelligence services. I was assigned to the German and Austrian desk. Our job was basically to manage the technical intelligence relationships with both of those governments. Most people didn't realize that we did have intelligence relationships with neutrals like Austria and Switzerland in addition to allies such as Germany. I worked with a senior woman officer and basically our job was to fashion the agreements on what we would and would not exchange with the BND and other intelligence agencies, to monitor the intelligence flow, to receive visitors, to handle cross training of specialists and analysts, and in some areas where NSA had people stationed overseas we had to look after the NSA units on the ground.

Q: The Germans have had quite a reputation of intercepting on the Russian front. Anyway, what about the Austrians. One doesn't think about them doing much more than being a piece of territory particularly Vienna where spies played against each other.

LA PORTA: I think that the Austrian interest as far as I can recollect it was really more in monitoring law enforcement issues and exchanging information on people who came to the Austrians' attention or our attention who were involved in the illegal activities you mentioned. I think Vienna had the ill deserved reputation largely because of the international agencies that are located there. In the same way people use Geneva as a very convenient way station. Nevertheless, those experiences, I think introduced me to the working world of intelligence, what intelligence people really do. Secondly, it gained me a lot of contacts that I found useful even a decade or more later. For example, people that we had worked with, even casually, wound up to be with the NSA contingent in Turkey when I served in there in the mid-'70s.

Q: Did you get any feel while you were at NSA about the relationship with the CIA? I mean it was kind of compartmentalized, but I mean did you get a feel that they talk to each other or were ships that pass in the night?

LA PORTA: I think that except of the very top level, the deputy and the deputy director level, there were really no close staff relationships with the agency insofar as I could understand. Certainly on the analyst level, there were not close relationships. This is quite different from today where if you went to a meeting of analysts at somebody's headquarters, you would probably find a NSA analyst or two in the room. The areas where I was given to understand that there was the most interface was in technical intelligence and counterintelligence because technical counterintelligence was highly important to the agency. It was NSA that had most of that expertise. The detection of compromises and intrusion devices, other kinds of hostile surveillance, and the security of encrypted materials all came from NSA. By and large the CIA was a pretty bottled up, uptight place in those years even though I had a couple of friends working there.

Q: Sampling this, you'd already figured you didn't want to work in New York, how about the intelligence field?

LA PORTA: I applied to the agency as a backstop against the Foreign Service. I figured, well, rather than NSA, although I had a perfectly good job and I got a promotion in good time and I certainly could have stayed there for any number of years, but I did apply to Langley and went through processing up through their polygraph examination and I decided, well, no I really didn't like that. Then the Foreign Service opportunity came along and it was a moot issue. I did take the Foreign Service examination in 1963 and the oral exam in the middle of '64 with much better results of course.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions?

LA PORTA: The questions were pretty subject matter and very general. What would you do in X, Y, Z situation or what would you advise the ambassador if you were privy to certain information that no one else in the mission had. Or you blurted something out in a staff meeting and get yourself slapped down because you're a junior officer. I think the questions in the oral were pretty much situational and attitudinal. How do you feel about X? There were questions on that exam I recall about the anti-war movement that was then developing. How did I feel about Vietnam because our government was in the middle of decision making in the beginning of the Johnson administration. I never could quite figure it out whether they were interested in those topics for security reasons or whether they were just interested to know where I was in my head.

Q: I suspect it's that.

LA PORTA: I suspect that, too.

Q: There's very little feedback to security problems. It's really to see how you react.

LA PORTA: I think that was the main tenor of the questioning. My entry into the Foreign Service from the summer of '64 to April of '65 was quite expeditious, I think no doubt helped because I had security clearances from NSA and the army. I think that shortened the waiting period. I was surprised when they gave me a reporting date and they said I could report in either April or June. Choosing April turned out to my disadvantage because my promotion to the exalted grade of GS-9 at NSA was being processed. The promotion did not come into force until after I left NSA to join the Foreign Service. The first bureaucratic wrangle I had at State was with the career management division about an increase in salary and entry to the FS at a higher grade because of this promotion. They said, no, you never got the promotion even though you had been notified on paper that you were getting it, because it was not effectuated. So I never got the increase in grade.

Q: Then you started when in April?

LA PORTA: I started on April 1 in 1965.

Q: '65. What was your basic officer course like? How did you see the people and how was it done?

LA PORTA: We had 27 or 28 people in the course. There were among that number about four USIA officers and the rest were regular State Foreign Service. We were pretty heavy on economic and political officers by recollection, very light in other fields. The course chairman at that time was Garrett Soulen, a very proficient officer and the deputy course coordinator was Bob Barnard who of course was legendary for all kinds of good stories. Looking back on it, and just having gone through unpacking of effects and looking at some old pictures, we had a very young class. I recall that at the age of 25, I was one of the older people in our class. There was one fellow who was an army captain, Bruce Rogers. There were maybe one other veteran, so he was maybe 28. We were a very young class and very little work experience on the part of most people. I wound up having served two years in the army and a little over two years at NSA as probably one of the more experienced people in the class. Even then I was very young and inexperienced.

Q: Women, minorities?

LA PORTA: We had several women who did extraordinarily well, including the last serving member of our class who is still on active duty, Louise Kelleher Crane who is the State vice president of AFSA. She gets the longevity prize for staying in active duty.

Q: How do you feel they prepared you?

LA PORTA: I thought FSI (Foreign Service Institute) was good in terms of the service orientation and to the degree that you could absorb a little of the substantive skills that you would need. The course duration was seven weeks and we all felt it was too short, that it could have easily have been ten weeks or a lot more. My pay problem was the first irritant with the State admin bureaucracy, and ever since that first experience, I was never an admirer of the general administrative apparatus which is probably why I spent so much time and effort trying to change it.

The payroll people didn't want to talk to you. The personnel people, except for your junior officer counselor, really weren't interested in anything you had to say. There are a number of things about the JO (Junior Officer) class that are familiar today. When you're coming to Washington of the first time and where are you going to live? State provided no facilities, no hints, no clues. The FSI at that time was in Arlington Towers in the basement and there were very few apartment complexes around. Incoming students from outside the metropolitan area were short-changed on their living allowances. You got zero help in getting relocated and most importantly, for the most part their spouses were ignored. The only thing that spouses got was a protocol course that lasted a few days if they wanted to take it. They were invited to one or two functions and that's all. I think that it wasn't until a few years later when I began to study language that attitudes towards spouse inclusion in language training began to change a little bit. As for the A-100 class very little attention was paid to family concerns. We hear some of these same things today and many of these problems were brought to AFSA when I was there.

Q: It was representative of the times then, too.

LA PORTA: I think so. They were just interested in the employee and they really didn't give a damn about anybody else.

Q: Of course at the same time they expected the wife to be a team member once you got abroad.

LA PORTA: No question about it. Although my first tour was in Washington, my second tour was overseas and my wife was included my EER.

Q: Oh, yes. Well, now when you were going through the basic officer course, they always ask where do you want to go and what do you want to do. What did you want to do and where did you want to go?

LA PORTA: I think that we were allowed to express preferences but we got no assignment list in those days. You were never given a list saying this is what the JO division has to fill in this cycle either by location or by types of job. You filled out a very brief form indicating area and functional preferences. Since you were brought in in cone the functional preferences almost always were in the political area. You didn't have to serve as a consular officer although the system said you did. Everybody's preferences were right on with their cone, then the geographic areas varied widely, mostly having to do with languages that people had had. In my case I was frankly just interested in Asia and learning a language. My second area of interest was Northern Africa and studying Arabic which I've never done, never been assigned there and never studied it. At any rate, we were allowed to go that far. The JO division in those days, and I later came to say 'appreciate' the process - to use the word advisedly - when I worked in personnel later, was a black box. In other words, it was pretty hermetically sealed. The junior officer, you had a very brief interview with your counselor, then they disappeared and never came back until the day that they gave you your assignments which were read out in class.

My first assignment, to be perfectly honest, was a disappointment. I was one of the two people in our class who were assigned to Washington and I was put into an administrative rotation program. All of the rest of our colleagues were assigned overseas to do "real work." One thing that does stand out was our contact with the Director General who at that time was Joseph Palmer, a very formidable, austere, Brahmin New Englander, otherwise a nice guy. I got to know him a little bit later on because I was working in the admin field and I worked in personnel. Apart from the Director General coming and talking to you during one hour session of you're A-100 class, there was very little contact with "real people" who worked in State functions. Most of our courses were done by FSI faculty people, some of them Foreign Service Officers, some not. Then we had one panel of junior officers. Tom Boyatt was on the panel for my A-100 class but apart from these two encounters no one really talked to us about life and careers in the FS; the FSI training was mostly skills-orientated.

Greater contact with people who were serving in mainline jobs, getting people from embassies, how does an embassy function, a day in the life of an embassy, and that kind of practical discussion would have been more helpful. Those are the things you kind of tend to learn on your own in the early stages of your career.

One anecdote that I still like to is when Joe Palmer was asked by one of our colleagues for his appraisal of the morale in the Foreign Service today. He looked at us and simply said, "When was it ever thus?" Then he went on to explain that every generation thinks that morale is lousy and yet everybody sticks with the profession.

Q: I used to feel, I would read these articles in the paper, some columnist would do this and I'd be shaving and I'd say, well, you know, I don't feel that bad, you know? It is a truism.

LA PORTA: I have told that story to younger officers and new recruits into the Foreign Service when I was in AFSA. The morale issue is one of the interesting features of our common existence.

Q: It is. You started in '65 was it?

LA PORTA: Right.

Q: How long were you in Washington?

LA PORTA: I was in Washington for two full years. I was in an administrative rotation program where I had assignments of four months each until I started Indonesian language training in the fall of 1964 and I arrived in Indonesia in April of 1967.

Q: You were doing administrative work for about a year?

LA PORTA: A little more than a year.

Q: What sort of things were you doing?

LA PORTA: My first assignment was probably the most unrewarding assignment in the Foreign Service and about which I knew absolutely nothing. This was the office of management planning and it was headed at that time by Dick Barrett who came out of MIT as Bill Macomber's management expert. His job was to implant something called the CCPS, the Consolidated Country Programming System, State's answer to Robert McNamara's PPBS(Planning, Programming and Budgeting System) at Defense..

Q: I remember that.

LA PORTA: Our office which was located on H Street was a small group; mostly civil servants and consultants, designed to install the CCPS system in the State Department. The fact that they had a couple of junior Foreign Service Officers working in there showed you how little they really knew about the State Department. CCPS, which has undergone many variations since then, sought to quantify goals and objectives as a means of budgetary allocation. Quantifying progress on the intangibles of foreign policy, today call "metrics," remains an unsolved problem.

Q: It was the matrix system.

LA PORTA: It was the matrix system. It was numerical. It was doing all the things Robert McNamara was accused of doing at the Defense Department. It was the State Department's effort to "catch up" to modern management. It was in its own way a fascinating experience, but it also showed you the folly running a program with outside experts and top down management. It was an absolute failure. You got no cooperation from anybody in the State Department particularly the Foreign Service Officers. The State Department management and Under Secretary for Management Bill Macomber at his worst said, "No, no, we're going to do this period", but made very little effort to explain it. He would not listeagain a problem of State management.

Q: I was in Yugoslavia at the time and I can remember the DCM calling me in and saying, would I like to do this at the post. He explained what it was and I said, thank you very much, but I think I'd rather do something else. I was chief of the consular section and I said, I would really like to stay and do that. I don't think they ever got anybody to do it.

LA PORTA: Thereby hangs the folly of successive management initiatives in the State Department because it was all wrongheaded right from the get-go. On the other hand, that in two respects I think that there was some value in it. On a personal basis, it got me interested in management unlike most State Department officers. Secondly, it was probably a necessary effort to introduce management by goals and objectives.

Q: I think that was the first time that they said, well, why do you have representation, who are you seeing, this type of thing, but it made very good sense.

LA PORTA: To force people to go through that discipline, though still far from ideal, is absolutely necessary. CCPS was a seminal effort. It was not successful, but it left some things there that through subsequent iterations began to be not bad. The fact that today each mission has to go through a codified planning process and the fact that each division in the Department has to go through that process is necessary in today's much more complex environment.

In fact, strategic planning is one of the things that I'm trying to bring to the organization that I head right now. We're going to develop goals and objectives and a strategy because we have to have it. I don't feel comfortable without it. In contrast to the military, which is very good at planning, we in the State Department are always lacking in that area. I still feel today that we are lacking in how we approach planning and how we as senior officers look at the value of planning. I think that this is something if the State Department is ever to grow up and if we're ever fully to justify ourselves to OMB and the Congress, the people who give us the money we operate on. We have to do a lot better at planning.

Q: I come out of the consular field and quite early on they developed essentially this. We expect you to issue so many visas and it costs so much to do this and we need so much money and we kept our visa fees.

LA PORTA: It didn't come for a while though. That began to happen in really the late '80s when Mary Ryan as executive assistant to Ron Spiers as Undersecretary, was able to use that process to break the consular receipts game. In other words, sHe argued that consular receipts have to be plowed back into the consular function rather than go into the general treasury. I served in the office of management planning in '85 to '87 and then I was associated with the strategic management initiative (SMI) in the early '90s at the beginning of the Clinton administration.

Q: Then what else were you doing this time during the rotation?

LA PORTA: Management planning introduced me to a new area of professional endeavor or expertise and interest that I carried away. My second rotation was in something that was even more arcane than that. That was in financial management in SA-1 (State Annex-1) off Virginia Avenue. There were seven old time civil servants and one junior Foreign Service Officer, me, who were responsible for writing financial regulations and doing financial analysis. One of the less rewarding projects that they threw to me was a review of the travel vouchering system.

Q: The Foreign Affairs Manual dealing with financials.

LA PORTA: Financial management. The regulations that budget people and voucher clerks and accountants used all over the world. Talk about really not knowing what you were doing! The travel voucher study earned me a total disdain for the way the Department manages itself in the fiscal area. The amount of paper. The amount of useless details that were and still are required in justifying one's travel. One thing that study, as naive as it may have been given my level of ignorance, showed me just how appallingly bad we manage ourselves in the State Department and how we're fundamentally unable and unwilling to change.

Q: I know around this time, a little earlier, but I was a vice consul in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia and we had next door to us an Aramco and Aramco figured out how much it cost to send somebody home. They said, here it is. They had to appear, they had to report somewhere and report back and that was it. God, when you think of the paper that saved.

LA PORTA: Even in those days they deposited travel money directly into your checking account. That's one of the things we advocated. I wrote down how to do it and then everybody decided that the OMB, GAO, and GSA would not allow that and we're still stuck with the same system of accountability even though now it's automated. We still have to provide the same kinds of documentation. We still have the same encrustation of rules in doing business. It became immediately apparent as you indicated to give you a bunch of money.

Q: If you want to make some money out of it and go third class that's your problem.

LA PORTA: That's exactly right. I will tell you it is the greatest weight that the State Department has to bear is the administrative apparatus that it has to maintain in accounting for things like travel and other regulatory functions. Payroll is an evil necessity, but even there I can give you a lot of examples that the State Department is dong things that it need not be doing. We should not be issuing our own orders for checks to the Treasury. We should employ another organization to do that, like the National Finance Center. All of these issues were dredged up in the course of those few months I worked on this study. Needless to say, as starry eyed as I might have been, you never could make the criticism as harsh as it should have been because it might be read by some senior officer. We explain away the need to reform. We inflict it on ourselves and we have only ourselves to blame. I have revisited a number of issues arising from that early report when I was in M (Management), in AFSA, and in Reinventing Government and yet we've gotten nowhere in making improvements.

Q: Well, then, after this glimpse of the smooth functioning system that you found in the State Department.

LA PORTA: I wound up in personnel. I was in personnel for about eight months.

Q: How did you find that?

LA PORTA: Personnel was a breath of fresh air. I was put in as an assignments officer in the office of functional personnel. Functional personnel, FPP as it was known at that time, was headed by Jules Bassin who, a wonderful man, lawyer, long time civil servant, a man of great integrity and personal consideration. Among the officers that I worked with were Joe Yodzis, a Foreign Service Officer who served in Yugoslavia, Harriet Isom who is retired living in Oregon, Dennis Kux who is still active on Indian subcontinent issues, and David Zweifel who is still with the Inspection Corps..

Q: Harriet Isom was an ambassador at one point.

LA PORTA: Twice, in Africa. I replaced her as principal officer in Medan in the early '70s. In FPP there was a civil service assignment office as well. Our job was to make assignments to the functional bureaus like the science bureau, public affairs, education and cultural affairs, the economic bureaus, and business affairs, international organizations (IO) and several others. Each of the assignments officers had a number of bureaus we were responsible for. The job very simply to make matches by brokering the assignments with the officer and with the receiving bureau. Then the assignments officer takes that assignment to panel which worked very much as they do today. There were fewer rules then.

In terms of how it worked, I thought was not bad. I also learned how the junior officer division worked. At that time the JO division had control over you for the first two assignments and a third assignment if you were in a rotational program. I remember that toward the end of my time in FPP my JO assignment officer Imelda Prokopovitsch, came down the hall and she said, "Congratulations, Al, you're assigned to Jakarta, Indonesia." That's all there was. There was no discussion or process.

A lot of good came out of that assignment. I think that I was lucky because I learned positive lessons in FPP as well as negative lessons from the financial management and management planning jobs. But all of those jobs were like oatmeal, they kind of stuck to your ribs for the rest of your career. I will have to say that Harriett Isom, David Zweifel and Dennis Kux are three of my best friends today.

Q: Well, now, you were in Indonesia for how long?

LA PORTA: My original assignment was for two years and then I was extended for a third.

Q: Did you have language training?

LA PORTA: Five months.

Q: How did you and Indonesian get along?

LA PORTA: Very well. Number one, while Indonesian is among the so-called "hard" languages, it is one of the easiest ones to learn. My wife took language with me and that was a win-win situation. We had superb instructors. In fact, two nights ago I had a little reunion with one of our instructors who is still teaching, and our other instructor is now head of the Indonesian, Tagalog, Burmese and Thai language section in the language school. Our linguist was superb, a guy named Joe Harter. Indonesian stuck with me pretty well. I just came back from ten days in Jakarta and even today the language holds up pretty well.

Q: You went out to Indonesia when?

LA PORTA: We arrived in early April 1965. We flew via Hawaii, Saigon and Singapore on a Pan American Airways Boeing 707. Because Indonesia was so unstable, planes didn't remain in Jakarta overnight. Pan Am flew into Jakarta twice a week but, paradoxically, there is no U.S. airline service to Indonesia.

Q: What was the situation in Indonesia at that point?

LA PORTA: It was pretty chaotic. The abortive communist coup against Sukarno occurred at the end of September 1965 and there was a student-led movement to clean out the government and the economy all but collapsed. The army under Suharto restored order and ended the conflicts with Malaysia and Singapore.

Q: I don't know if it was the year of living dangerously, but damn close.

LA PORTA: Sukarno was in internal exile and the last remnants of his power were removed about the same month I arrived in Indonesia.

Q: What were you learning about Indonesia before you went out there? What were we trying to do there?

LA PORTA: I was assigned as chief of the consular section. While I was somewhat familiar with Indonesia, the only country-specific preparation we had was the half day of area studies we had during language school. Otherwise we were on our own to read, try to find knowledgeable people in the department, or whatever. The situation in Indonesia was very murky for more than a year in terms of what the post-Sukarno era was going to bring. Ambassador Marshall Green had arrived only six months or so before we arrived. The embassy had been evacuated and families were just starting to come back to the mission in early 1967. There was a general lack of clarity, although what was clear was that the United States was banking on the army under Suharto to restore stability and to create conditions to get the economy moving. In this regard, USAID (United States Agency for International Development) had just reestablished its mission as a small unit in the embassy and the multilateral organizationthe World Bank, IMF (International Monetary Fund) and UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) were moving in.

On the political side, I think the only thing we did know at that point, and this was certainly Marshall Green's view and the one that he pressed with Washington, was that we had to get behind the moderate forces of Suharto. The fact was that there was only one person in the U.S. government who knew Suharto before he actually emerged to lead the army. He was Colonel George Benson who had been the defense attachï¿½ in the late '50s and got Suharto military training in the United States at Fort Leavenworth. Suharto literally came out of obscurity to command the army after the top commanders were killed in the abortive coup. Suharto was head of the strategic army command and he had accumulated a group of loyal officers who were opposed to Sukarno's socialism and who were virulently anti-Communist. What we did know in late 1965 and 1966 was that the Suharto government was going to shape up as something good for the United States and good for the region. At least the Indonesians weren't going to go back to war or Konfrontasi with Malaysia and do other foolish things that they were doing under Sukarno.

Q: Konfrontasi?

LA PORTA: Konfrontasi was Sukarno's way of picking fights with the former British colonies. After the abortive coup, most of the leadership of the communist party was rounded up and there were 12,000 people put on trial. Our officers in the political section, Dick Howland, Paul Gardner and Bob Martens, who was an experienced Sovietologist, were gathering information on the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, Communist Party of Indonesia); they knew these guys, had networked them, understood the relationships within the party and front organizations to the extent possible. The military under Suharto under marshal law rooted them out branch by branch.

Q: Bob Martens has been accused of supplying Suharto's people with a death list when what he was doing was compiling lists of party cadres, mostly from open sources. As a Sovietologist coming right out of Moscow, you read the paper, you found out who was going to what meetings and all that and had a pretty good list.

LA PORTA: He had card files and as they were able to map the communist party bureaucracy. Now, most of what they were working on at the same time has been studied by scholars. Even by that time Arnold Brackman, the foremost scholar of the PKI, had published four books on the PKI, so public knowledge was available.

Today, public information substantiates the information that Bob Martens, Dick Howland and others developed during that period.

Q: When you arrived out there, did you feel, I mean were you still picking up although this had taken place before, but sort of the residue of the tremendous split there had been in the embassy when Howard Jones was ambassador and seemed to be far too tolerant of Sukarno?

LA PORTA: I would say that those very quickly became non-factors because the embassy was evacuated right after October of 1965. 30 September 1965 to be precise.

Q: This was when the generals were all killed?

LA PORTA: In the violence after the attempted coup, families were evacuated and the embassy had only a skeleton staff for eight months to a year. Marshall Green succeeded Howard Jones. Marshall Green was a man of unquestioned integrity, balance, judgment and had very good access in Washington. It was very difficult to convince Washington that it was in the U.S. interest to provide assistance, mainly economic, to the new Suharto government.

We had a couple of officers who were well experienced Indonesian hands who were in the AID side and those offices were integrated into the embassy because the AID mission was dismantled well before the coup. We had military attachï¿½s and George Benson was making trips back to the country. The office of Defense Cooperation was just one or two officers. You had a small well knit and well directed country team during kind of those formative months in late '65 and '66. Marshall Green treated every officer, even the most junior, as a professional. I recall that I received my promotion to FSO-6 on the airplane heading to Indonesia. As an FSO-6 I was treated with respect and dignity by Marshall Green. Truly extraordinary.

Q: Did you fall victim to his puns?

LA PORTA: Oh, absolutely. Everybody did and I quote some of them to this day.

Q: He's a tremendous man. I've done world histories with him and of course he's passed on, but we have a good solid record in various stages of his career.

LA PORTA: For that reason, when he became assistant secretary after he left Jakarta a lot of us who were fortunate enough to work with him, said, gee whiz, Marshall Green is right about the aerial bombing of Cambodia and other military activities that did not bring credit on the United States. Marshall loved his golf and he occasionally got snappish, mostly at Mrs. Green and she snapped back at everybody else. She was still a wonderful lady. Jack Lydman, a model of rectitude and high professional standards, was the DCM. My wife and I were treated with unfailing kindness by both the Lydmans and the Greens. I subsequently worked with Jack Lydman in Malaysia and of course saw the Marshall Greens over the long span of years. The relationship between Jodie Lydman, Jack's wife and Lisa Green was not always good. Jodie, we learned later, was scared to death of Lisa and yet when Jodie was the ambassador's wife in Malaysia, we thought she was pretty imperious.

Q: It was a different era. As a consular officer, what were you doing?

LA PORTA: We had a very heavy workload in the consular section. We had two and a half consular officers. I had a vice consul working for me, Dick La Rocha. With La Porta working in the same office it was confusing, in fact somebody called us the two La's. Get whichever La is there and tell him to get his butt up here, that kind of thing. We had three consular clerks and the large workload was caused simply by travel of any kind, business or pleasure, after the worst of times during the Sukarno period. All Indonesians wanted to go somewhere and mostly to the United States.

The second factor was ethnic Chinese Indonesians who wanted to get out because of periodic violence against them and because the Chinese as a group fell under suspicion as a result of PRC (People's Republic of China) support of the PKI.

Q: These were the overseas Chinese?

LA PORTA: When the going gets tough you take it out on the overseas Chinese, especially the unassimilated Chinese. In the mid-60s, unless the Chinese were from Central and East Java, they were for the most part unassimilated, that is, they were Chinese speaking Chinese, most of them living in urban ghettos, most of them going to Chinese schools, which Sukarno banned. Later in the late 70's when I served in Medan, we could see the enduring effects of discrimination against the Chinese.

Q: They were small shopkeepers, weren't they?

LA PORTA: Mostly small businessmen, but later groups of very affluent Chinese businessmen emerged to support Suharto and in fact became the core of Suharto's very corrupt and personalized system by the mid-80s and beyond.

Q: What were the Chinese, did they want to go to the United States?

LA PORTA: They wanted to go for education and business, but once they got here, graduate school or undergraduate school was a vehicle to bring the families over. We really had to clamp down a lot on specious applications.

This situation gave rise to some very good stories. My vice consul at that time was Tom Reynders. He and I occasionally did a "Mutt and Jeff" routine with suspicious visa applicants, especially relating to the Chinese problem. One day we had an applicant and his name was Ed Yani. We knew his family was well off and he wanted to go to the United States to join his sister who was in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh. We kept him coming back, asking for more information, believing that he was an intending immigrant. Finally he said, look, let me tell you the real reason I want to go to the United States. I want to get married and I'm going to marry this girl who is in Connecticut. We said, why didn't you say so? No problem, you want to get married? We've got our little process for that. Bring in an affidavit of support from your intended father-in-law and some information about your fianc¿½e. Once he fessed up, issuing a visa was no problem because we got to know him pretty well by that time.

Some months later my wife was in charge of the American Women's Association welcome committee, so new Americans arriving in Jakarta would get a visit from my wife. She'd take a basket of goodies, some books and we had a little embassy orientation. My wife came home one night and she said, "I met this real nice girl. She says she just started teaching at the international school." I said, "Okay, why don't you invite them over for a movie?" Those were the days when you had real movies, not videotapes or DVD's.

Q: Because you could show them in your home.

LA PORTA: We had an embassy projector. I don't remember what the movie was that night. Then this very lovely looking American girl teacher came to the door with her husband behind her. It was this fellow Ed Yani who we sweated so much over his visa. We looked at each other and we both pointed to each other at the same time, "you!" They are good friends to this day and we know their family and their boys. It's one of those rewarding things that do happen in our business.

Q: This is in the mid-60s and all. It was also the period of young Americans, college grads, they're also getting messed up with drugs and all.

LA PORTA: The drug trade was through Afghanistan, Nepal and India. Hippie types used to get on the hash trail and come down to Jakarta. We had enormous troubles with American citizens services. I remember my wife and I going out in an absolute deluge of a rainstorm at midnight trying to find a druggie who had gone berserk. We found him holed up in the Catholic Cathedral in the middle of Jakarta. We got him into our car and to the mental hospital. The practice there was that any druggies they found they used to put into the mental hospital but the inmates always bribed the guards and were able to escape. We were constantly faced with those kinds of situations.

Q: Was Bali in your district?

LA PORTA: For a while Bali was in Jakarta's consular district but when our consulate in Surabaya got sufficient staff and a dedicated consular officer, we transferred Bali to the Surabaya district. Later on a consular agency was set up in Bali.

Q: I think Dick Howland was telling me that. Were you having problems with Americans as a case, I mean sometime ago a couple of American guys hiking have never been found.

LA PORTA: We had several Americans disappear. We had an American missionary who disappeared in Papua. Michael Rockefeller disappeared in Papua from the mission in Ogontz on the South coast. We had hikers who disappeared going up a volcano in North Sumatra. The supposition was that they became overcome by fumes and probably fell into one of the pools as the remains were never found.

Auto accidents were always a difficulty, the bane of consular officers everywhere. We had an epidemic of auto accidents and one whole family was killed in Central Java. Another thing that was not great fun during those years was the plague, Bubonic Plague outbreaks in Central Java. We had to check out reports there were Americans in the area. We would literally have to find them because there was no electronic means to get in touch to warn them about the plague and tell them to leave the area.

Q: Is there anything else that we should cover in this period, in Indonesia, this was what '65 to '67?

LA PORTA: '65 to '67 and then I switched over to the political section.

Q: Have we covered the consular section?

LA PORTA: I think we've pretty much covered consular work.

Q: If you think of anything else.

LA PORTA: There is one incident I do want to talk about, Okinawa fishermen.

Q: Today is April 23rd, 2004. Al, let's talk about Okinawa fishermen.

LA PORTA: Right. This was one of the rare opportunities where, as a very junior section head in the embassy, you actually had a chance to do something that kind of got close to negotiations and involved another government in addition to the Indonesian authorities. The issue turned out to be quite complex because the United States still had not given up control of Okinawa; the reversion agreement came along in the mid-1970's. Still in the late '60s the United States was responsible for protecting Okinawans and Okinawan fishing vessels who were fairly aggressive trawlers for shrimp and squid. They regularly found their way to Southeast Asia and to Indonesian waters as well as the Philippines and other places. Needless to say the Indonesians at that time tried to be very aggressive in protecting their economic zone. This was before the Law of the Sea treaty and they fairly regularly picked up Okinawan fishing vessels who they considered were poaching in their waters. The boats would be impounded and sometimes confiscated, but always in places that were relatively inaccessible like Halmahera Island in the Northern extremity of Indonesia, or Ambon in Maluku or Manado in North Sulawesi. The consul had to take care of the Okinawans as if we were taking care of a normal U.S. citizen. We had to respond several times by sending consular officers off to broker with the local authorities and secure the release of these vessels on some kind of bail arrangement. The Okinawans would put up a lot of money and we'd give it to the Indonesians and say oh, yes, we'll appear in court which they never did. We tried to pass the responsibility to the Okinawan administration but they would not discourage the fishermen from illegally fishing in Southeast Asia. In these cases. We exercised a welfare and protection function that was exercised on behalf of a territory that we governed with the inevitable complications with the authorities in Japan because the Okinawan government immediately would complain to Tokyo about the beastly treatment their peaceful fishermen were being accorded in Indonesia

On one occasion I went to Okinawa to talk to the Okinawan government and the local authorities. Needless to say all of the mayors of the fishing towns along the coast were exercised that the Indonesians had objections about the illegal fishing. In one incident, two Okinawan fishermen who, as far as we could ascertain, were killed in a drunken brawl, or possibly fell off their boats while drunk. Their remains were never recovered. We had to make this little pilgrimage to Okinawa. In one case we had to repatriate the remains of a deceased Okinawan, see the families and other grieving people. It was a very good slice of life of what I would call the exercise of a consular function at its most creative.

I had a murder case when I was in Mongolia that was also creative in its own ways, but the Okinawan fishing vessels were certainly a challenge for everybodone that doesn't make the headlines, but one that was important to the Okinawans and the Indonesians.

Q: The usual bail thing, we've all been doing consular work, been through this, get somebody to make bail and you know they're gong to skip. Everybody knows they're going to skip. The local authorities would be damned annoyed if they got stuck with them because they had to feed them, but did you let them negotiate the amount or did you have to negotiate the amount of bail?

LA PORTA: Well, the shipping companies sometimes sent agents from Okinawa and sometimes we had to negotiate the bail based on ostensible standard practice, but more importantly, the Indonesians wanted U.S. sovereign assurances that these Japanese fishing people would not come to Indonesia, of course assurances that we could not give. We did negotiate a memorandum which did get the agreement of the Okinawan provincial officials and the Indonesian sea communications ministry, in which everybody agreed to act with restraint and to admit when vessels were trespassing. The Indonesian authorities undertook to notify us of any cases. It was a face saving formula in which the local authorities could say they had really gotten something in terms of better behavior. Interestingly the problem ceased to be an issue by the time of reversion and I suspect either the Japanese or Okinawan fishing industries were persuaded by their government or they just let the Filipinos do the fishing for them.

Q: How did you find the local officials? You know, this, look at Indonesia in a way as sort of a vast island empire and I was wondering whether you found a difference in how you dealt with the Ambonese as compared to Sumatrans or something like that.

LA PORTA: In fact we found the local officials easier to deal with than some of the ministry people that we had to deal with in Jakarta in the consular division of the foreign affairs ministry or others from the interior ministry or the sea communications ministry. Of course the fishermen were not stupid. They had plenty of money on board their ships to spread around so they were able to pay rather lavishly for whatever services, food and drink they needed. I think that when you do get to the outer islands, even up in Halmahera, way in the North which is a very staunch Muslim area, the local officials always were tempered with reality and they liked the United States. I think that frankly they just wanted somebody to pay attention to them and say oh, yes, you do have a serious problem and yes, we will do something about it. Yes, we will take these Japanese off your hands. Yes, they will pay enough money. I think that they wanted to have that kind of attention instead of just sending reports to Jakarta.

Q: Did you get any feel about the aftermath, this is some years later, but when the Japanese occupied Indonesia about the feeling of local people? How did that go?

LA PORTA: The anti-Japanese feeling was actually quite strong, even in the mid '60s through the '80s. The local people, even younger ones, did not forget the Japanese occupation. In the Northern part of Indonesia, in the islands it was quite widespread. The Japanese established large ports for their capital ships up in the Northern part of Indonesia. In fact a lot of the ships that went to the Battle of the Coral Sea and other engagements were sheltered in Indonesian ports.

Q: The whole Leyte Gulf operation which is the biggest naval battle ever, was based because of the oil near Borneo off Borneo or from Cam Ran Bay or that whole area.

LA PORTA: The islands in western Indonesia are bigger and closer together. The Japanese based in Singapore committed all kinds of atrocities and abuse in the British territories. The dislike continues to this day. In Indonesia people didn't like to deal with Japanese, although they armed Indonesian nationalists and the precursor of the armed forces. They made fun of the Japanese physical characteristics and it is said that the Japanese normally behaved with restraint because they understood this phenomenon.

Through the '70s, '80s and even into the '90s we saw Japanese efforts to pay conscience money for the war. This phenomenon today is very much present in Vietnam which has now become more open to external and Japanese influence as well as Mongolia where I served. The Japanese will send peace delegations every year for memorial purposes, to pay homage and to give money. A lot of their assistance is justified in terms of overcoming the legacy of the past. Then of course, the whole Japanese-Chinese problem is still not only festering, but it is truly at a very raw stage. The whole issue of the occupation of Nanking, Shanghai and other areas where there were very serious depredations. I don't think that's going to go away. I think that is a very strong element today in the Chinese attitude toward economic competition with the Japanese.

Q: During this mid '60s period, how was the Indochinese war because the fighting of all three countries, how was that playing?

LA PORTA: Like most things involving the United States, there is a certain double-edged characteristic. I think there was a significant part of the body politic that not only tolerated, but tacitly supported U.S. objectives in mainland Southeast Asia because they, too felt that they were a domino. In Indonesia, in the setting of the abortive coup by the PKI and the reaction that set in during the early Suharto years, the suppression of communism, the arrest of thousands of people who were PKI members or fellow travelers or intellectuals who supported the communists was justified by pointing to Vietnam and the dangers of letting the communists go too far. At the same time, the Indonesians had no particular liking for the Vietnamese whom they considered almost Chinese anyway, and they wanted to support the Thai against communism. ASEAN was in its very nascent stage, so they wanted to be supportive of the Thai. As long as the Thai said, no, we need to defend ourselves against the tide of communism and we can't allow it to extend into the Thai heartland or whatever, they were inclined to support it. The Indonesians also supported the British anti-Communist campaign in Borneo where the communist guerrillas were particularly strong. There was a lot of unstated but significant cooperation between the Indonesian armed forces and the British on the ground in Borneo. When communist terrorist groups were discovered in Indonesian territory, very often they were dealt with summarily.

This was a change from Sukarno who was very much influenced by the PKI in his own government and was rabidly anti-British. But Suharto's inclination was to cooperate tacitly.

Regarding Vietnam, in the early years of the Suharto government there was still a lot of flux on the Indonesian side, but the fall of Vietnam came as a big shock to most Indonesians as it did to others in Southeast Asia because (A) they expected the United States to stay the course and (B) they did not think the United States would be militarily humiliated in the way that it was. That provoked a lot of very nervous thinking. On the governmental level they tacitly accepted and tolerated, the U.S. presence in mainland Southeast Asia. On the public level and among the intellectuals and media, the feeling was to keep U.S. power far, far away, somewhere over the horizon, somewhere around Guam. In other words they didn't want the U.S. flexing its muscles or pursuing its anti-Communist crusade so close to their doorstep. There was certainly a desire for distance. We also had our hands full with Arab-Israel issues and the aftermath of the 1967 War.

Q: Do you want to talk about that? One doesn't think about the, what was it the Six Day War of 1967, Arab Israeli War as being a cause often in Indonesia.

LA PORTA: This is one of the factors that has not been understood in our public diplomacy or in our policy approaches to the region. Since the 1956 War and continuing through the 1967 War and any major eruption in the Middle East, there has been a significant reaction among Muslims as far away as Southeast Asia.

This is one of the constant phenomena in our relations with not only Indonesia, but also Malaysia where the Malaysian support of the Palestinians and the Arab mainstream is even greater than it is in Indonesia. Every time there was a major eruption, including U.S. management of the hostage taking in Iran, U.S. actions were perceived to be anti-Islamic and provoked a reaction against us diplomatically, in the media and in terms of public demonstrations and outbursts in Indonesia. So, every time a major incident occurred in the Middle East you could watch the clock, waiting for the crowds to appear in front of your gate in real protest. When I was the consular officer in 1967 my office was closest to the front gate and you were literally watching these protesters trying to come over the fence. It was not a comfortable feeling and always a challenge, whether I was in Jakarta or a decade later in Medan, to deal with the politically energized Muslim community which had real complaints with U.S. actions and U.S. policies in the Middle East. The impact on the majority of the world's Muslims living in Southeast Asia and elsewhere outside the Middle East heartland is still something our government doesn't comprehend.

Q: One of the things that keeps getting pointed out and that is the Muslim countries have been screaming and yelling, almost literally about the Palestinian cause, but you look from Saudi Arabia, to Kuwait and Egypt and beyond, what the hell have they done about the Palestinians. It's as though the Palestinians were designated to be beaten up by the Israelis while all the Muslim countries sat on the sidelines because they certainly could have done something to make Palestine a stronger, more self-supporting state.

LA PORTA: I think that Southeast Asia interest largely devolves very much on two elements. First is the non-implementation of successive UN resolutions on the Middle East. It is perceived there, but also in this country, that Israel exceeded, ignored or abused various UN resolutions. The other big complaint that they have with us is our lack of evenhandedness. In other words, we wholeheartedly will do everything to support the Israeli government of the day, presently Mr. Sharon, whereas we're not really trying to do anything to implement the peace plan vis-ï¿½-vis the Muslim community or the Palestinian authority. The way we treat the Palestinian authority, Arafat and his people that they perceive to be legitimate right or wrongly, is a constant cause for complaint. Today this is exacerbated by the U.S.-European split where the EU and most European countries strongly are on the Palestinians' side, while we are one of the few countries supporting Israel.

Q: What was life like for you and your wife? Did you have children at the time?

LA PORTA: My daughter was born while we were serving in Jakarta. She was born in 1969. She actually was born in Penang, Malaysia, because the hospitals in Indonesia were not up to Western standards. People either go to Singapore to have babies or in our case we chose to go to Penang. There was a Seventh Day Adventist Hospital where my daughter was born there and after about a week we made our way back to Indonesia.

In Jakarta there were undoubted challenges in the late '60s and early '70s with the law and order situation as large numbers of Indonesian soldiers who had been involved in the Konfrontasi against Malaysia under Sukarno were being demobilized. Because you were Western and the Western community was quite small, you were a target for thievery and vandalism. This is not uncharacteristic for the Foreign Service and most people took that kind of thing in stride.

We were not, however, personally assaulted or denigrated because we were Americans or because we were Westerners. When you traveled outside of Jakarta, or the further you got from Jakarta, you were greeted as somewhat of a curiosity because there were not large numbers of foreigners living in Indonesia then. Very often the children would greet you by calling you Om which is Dutch for uncle. Most Indonesians and certainly the student movement, which had been politically active in installing the New Order government and cleaning out the old bureaucracy and PKI, was very friendly to us. We had a lot of very good associations in that time which survive today among student leaders from Muslim organizations or among University of Indonesia students. My wife and I, as young embassy officers, were urged to get out and talk to student organizations. My wife had a couple of conversation groups. She had a group of well-connected older ladies who wanted to improve their English. She had a French conversation group because she also speaks pretty good French. Then she had another group of students for English. We kind of grew up with those people. They were not much younger than we were and we do still have a lot of those associations.

Q: Well, because of the violence after the abort of the PKI coup, I take it that the universities were essentially cleansed of what so often has happened around the world. That is a very Marxist faculty and a very leftist student organization which usually gets dissipated once they get out, but at the time this was not the case in Indonesia at the time?

LA PORTA: There was certainly some cleaning out of the universities and public organizations of staunch and identifiable pro-communist elements. Others just found it convenient just to keep quiet. The Suharto government in the early days took pains to appoint "reliable" people to head public bodies. Yes, there were purges of the media, but not wholesale purges as only some people who were banned from teaching in universities. Many thousands were arrested and put into reeducation camps or were imprisoned for long periods of time.

On the other hand, I think that, given the nature or the fairly low state of the university and public school systems, there was certainly a long way to go in terms of getting them up to any degree of acceptability. Responsible educators, faculty members and student organizations were very much open to accepting outside help. They knew they had to modernize. They had to reach out to send people to the United States and Western Europe and Japan and other places in order to improve their academic competence because they had lost so much, in the previous six, seven or eight years of the Sukarno regime. There was a profound opening up and the United States did a lot in terms of its public affairs outreach, much of which has atrophied today, sad to say, in terms of establishing or reopening libraries, establishing the Indonesian-American institutes in major cities, reconstituting the Fulbright boards and creating other kinds of binational programs. This is something that was very dynamic at that time and in fact my wife worked part time for USIS in order to locate students to form the first U.S. alumni groups. So, when we traveled out of Jakarta, which was fairly often as head of the consular section, we would look up students that we knew to be dispersed around the country, even in Papua.

Q: Well, then in '69 you moved over to the political section?

LA PORTA: I took the portfolio for Muslim and outer island affairs. That occasioned more travel. My Indonesian language skills were pretty good and I shifted almost seamlessly into that job. As a consular officer we sometimes did political reporting on our trips.

Q: At that time, was there a concern? I mean you look at the thing, Indonesia on the map and you think this is a place where there would be separatist tendencies, disintegration along the periphery, you know, you've got your center and you've got Java and you've got Sumatra and maybe Bali, you think that a lot of these islands begin to, hell with this, let's go. Was that, were we concerned about it, too, were there any signs of that happening?

LA PORTA: We were very much concerned and still are today. For example, in 1974, Hasan di Tiro founder of the Aceh Merdeka Movement, the Free Aceh Movement or GAM felt that he had been promised regional autonomy by Sukarno back in the early 1960s. When he didn't get it he organized a guerilla group against the Indonesian central authority. Partially as a Malaysian reaction against Sukarno's policy of Konfrontasi received support from across the Strait of Malacca. Some of this support was real and some of it just simply lip service, but the GAM movement continued with peaks and troughs over the years. There were separatist movements in Borneo that were aided and abetted by the communist insurgency that spilled over into the Indonesian side.

There were also Christian dissidents in Manado nearest to the Southern Philippines city of Davao who were campaigning for autonomy. In Maluku you still have the Republic of the South Moluccas (RMS) group going back to the '50s who were agitating for a freedom for the Christian majority region. These Christian groups received support from the Netherlands and from human rights organizations. Moving around to Papua, you had a history of brokering deals, including by Ellsworth Bunker and others, for the Dutch withdrawal and handing Papua over to Indonesian authority under something in 1969 that we jokingly called the Act Free of Choice. The Act of Free Choice was a contrived process for consultations with hand-picked local leaders on the district level. District assemblies were convened and they said yes, we'd like to be part of Indonesia and we want to be rid of the evil Dutch. Whether that represented any kind of authentic expression of the people is open to debate, but we argued at the time that it was probably as good a popular expression as you were going to get because of the bad communications and the very low state of development of the indigenous society. Now 35 years later the Organisasi Papua Merdeka, the Free Papua Movement (OPM) is still agitating. There are calls from the human rights and civil society organizations for another exercise in self-determination in Papua. I firmly believe that, as in 1969, Papua is nowhere near capable of full self-government; if anything the political, social and economic situation there is more complex than it was in 1969 and there has been a great deal of integration with the rest of Indonesia. An independent Papua would only become a failed state like Papua-New Guinea (PNG) and increasingly East Timor.

Sukarno, I think, made two major contributions to Indonesia. One was the creation of a unitary state and the other was the creation of a national language. Today you have to distinguish carefully between the Aceh and Papua situations. These are very different things. In Papua today we see on TV, all of these well dressed very articulate Papuan representatives of one or another human rights or civil society organization arguing for freedom from the Indonesia government. Okay, what's wrong with this picture? Number one, 35 years ago they would not have been well dressed or hardly dressed at all. Number two, they were all educated in Indonesian institutions and they all speak perfect idiomatic Indonesian. In Papua there are 13 different major tribal groups, usually fighting with each other. They all achieved their status as a result of their affiliation inclusion in Indonesia. In Aceh these GAM leaders headquartered in Sweden are trying simply to gain control over natural resources, not for the greater benefit of Acehnese society, or to advance the cause of Islam, but simply to gain political power and money. I don't find a lot of merit in the Aceh freedom movement, having dealt with them closely when I was consul in Medan. I even had something to do with them when I was in Malaysia.

You will always have these separatist tendencies in parts of Indonesia in varying degrees. Even some Balinese want more recognition for themselves. It is Jakarta's job in this case to deal with those disaffections and to conciliate in a constructive way, not to suppress local sentiment but to make government decentralization, power sharing and resource sharing work. A lot of these things can be negotiated with some sensitivity and patience on the basis of what the local inhabitants want in terms of greater self-government. Since the fall of the Suharto regime, a decentralization law has been passed and special local autonomy laws have been approved for Aceh and Papua. It is within the power of the central government to lose the game, but with a little wisdom and skill most experts in the United States and other countries believe that they can certainly make things better as regards to the separatist feelings. Nevertheless, in some parts of the country, such as Central Sulawesi and Maluku, local tensions are being exacerbated by extreme radical Muslims.

Q: At your time though I want to go back to the late '60s when you were dealing with it, how was the situation then?

LA PORTA: The situation in Aceh was fairly quiet. We knew that small bands of armed fighters, bandits we called them bandits, were there and the old Aceh nationalist leader, Daud Beureueh, was in exile in Malaysia. It was not an open armed insurrection then. In Papua you had the Act of Free Choice in 1969 but some armed groups operated in the border area with Papua-New Guinea (PNG). By and large there were minor of hit-and-run banditry attacks on police posts every few months and flag raisings which they still do today. Hoisting the flag of the Free Papua Movement or the Free Aceh Movement is a symbol saying, we're here and don't forget us. The damage that could be inflicted was rather small, however.

Q: You mentioned three places. I wonder if you could talk about them again. Now, obviously particularly at this time there's still a sizeable native Dutch group as well as Indonesian refugees in the Netherlands. Were they playing much of a role? Was it positive or negative?

LA PORTA: The Dutch opted out completely. The Dutch interest when they saw that Suharto was going to oust the Sukarno completely, turned to getting back some of their economic assets that were nationalized under state socialism. They didn't try to reclaim all of their old properties, but they did come back into plantation management, banking and some industrial sectors. The Dutch trading companies came back, but at a fairly low level of activity. It wasn't until really the mid-'70's or even later that the Dutch established a cultural institute and began to teach Dutch again.

Q: The ï¿½migrï¿½ group there was not one, I mean in the Netherlands was not one that sort of was raising hell, or was it?

LA PORTA: The people who were raising hell were the Ambonese from Maluku, the Moluccas, who migrated to Holland in the '50s because their outer island rebellion was put down early in the independence period. Many of those political activists were of mixed blood and in Holland they formed the Republic of the South Moluccas, the RSM, which conducted terrorist activities in Holland. They hijacked trains. They bombed banks. There were incidents directed at companies and organizations that they thought were collaborating either with Sukarno or Suharto. The Dutch welcomed these people with great tolerance, I might add, and have assimilated them in many ways. The Dutch and mixed blood Indos, as they're called in Indonesia, had very little impact. Some took pains to blend in although there were some of mixed blood who were active and became active in the Christian churches. They also preserved the old Dutch churches, transformed the Dutch Reform Church into a variety of local churches.

Q: What about the Swedes. The Swedes were attractive to socialist type governments like Sukarno's.

LA PORTA: The Swedes had no role in the Sukarno years but no one really knew. The nature of the abortive communist coup was obscure really and it took a while for the Suharto government to get organized and strip the last remnants of power from Sukarno which it did in early March of 1967. I think that most foreign governments approach such situations carefully and concentrated on the humanitarian aspects. The economy under the last years of Sukarno had fallen into total disrepair. Things did not work, goods did not move, trains did not run, ships did not sail. The infrastructure, like Iraq, had degenerated into great disrepair. The European countries were willing to put a lot into humanitarian programs like feeding, health and so forth. The Swedes were strong in that area and they still are today. There weren't any particular antagonisms. The Dutch became very generous and became the conveners in 1968 of the first meeting of the donors consultative group for Indonesia called the IGGI, Intergovernmental Group for Indonesia. The Dutch went beyond their colonial legacy in order to do that and got Western European donors, the United States, Canada, Japan and the international organizations around the table every year for pledging sessions and to review the Suharto government's development plans.

Q: Do you have any response to accusations that the embassy had been the instigator of the killings after the abortive coup? I had a long interview with Bob Martens sometime ago. He supplied lists of people he thought were members of the communist party. The American press enjoyed saying we were behind the Suharto regime. Was this happening?

LA PORTA: Certainly the accusations were made and in fact they were largely stimulated by a number of academics. Ben Anderson and Ruth McVey and the group at Cornell, as well as some others that people that I knew who in fact that were associated with Indonesia from the mid '60s. One of them in fact was the chair of a rule of law panel that was hosted by USINDO a few days ago and he brought up the question of the 1966 abortive coup and he said things that he was saying at the time that the United States was responsible for aiding and abetting Suharto in repressing the people in an undemocratic fashion. Those accusations, in my view, will never completely go away as long as there is room for debate because I think that certainly the record and the pros and cons cannot be proven conclusively to anybody's satisfaction.

The mainstream belief, and certainly as far as the embassy was concerned, was that Ambassador Howard Jones was probably overly tolerant of Sukarno and his hijinks. Some in the embassy like Bob Martens, and Dick Howland and a few others had studied the PKI. There were Indonesians who were very well acquainted with this in the government and some outside the government. I think that the idea of U.S. collusion with Suharto just simply doesn't hold weight. There's also still room for debate as to the number and extent of revenge killings in East Java, Bali and other places where supposedly eye witnesses said that there were bodies of people killed and dumped into the rivers. I talked to a couple of embassy officers who went to East Java. They went to an area where a lot of killings were alleged to have occurred; this was in a missionary area of East Java where there were Americans living there. The Americans said, we didn't see anything like this.

Q: During the '50s the CIA had sort of blotted its copybook.

LA PORTA: No question.

Q: By including the plane shootout and I can't think of the guy's name now.

LA PORTA: Alan Pope.

Q: Alan Pope. Anyway, at the time you were there was the CIA active as a useful member of the team as a political officer, how did you find it at that time?

LA PORTA: The agency people at that time were few number. We only had a few officers, maybe three or four and they essentially confined themselves at that time to liaison with the Indonesian intelligence bodies, both military intelligence and with the national intelligence agency. The fact that the head of the intelligence agency was put there by Suharto and was one of Suharto's right hand people of course offered opportunities for the intelligence folks.

Q: You were saying George Benson knew Suharto. Was he the new defense attachï¿½ at that point?

LA PORTA: George Benson was the army attachï¿½ in the late '50s and I believe up until 1961 or so and George was back here in the Pentagon. I believe that he had been seconded to a position in DIA at Bolling Air Force Base. George Benson and the coup is a legendary story among Indonesia hands. When Washington first knew that something was happening, well, they wanted to know who's this guy Suharto? What is his command, KOSTRAP (the Army's so-called strategic command)? Who were these commanders who were taking over the government in the new situation? Everybody put out the call to George Benson, brought him in and said George, who are these guys? He knew Suharto as a commander, as a lieutenant colonel and a colonel. He was able to forge a relationship. George came out to India, first on TDY and later served as an advisor to Ambassador Frank Galbraith. He didn't come back as an attachï¿½.

Q: I think that, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but the CIA during the late '60s into early '70s were keeping a low profile. It didn't want to get out ahead of things.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. Ambassador Green and later Ambassador Galbraith made sure that the interests of the agency were circumscribed and harnessed quite tightly to the country team and the interests of the ambassador. There was a lot of discussion at that timl was not privy obviously to the detailof whether the United States should or should not support the Suharto regime in a paramilitary way or whether we should extend overt military assistance and so forth. Both Ambassador Green and later Galbraith said, no, this has to be done in a transparent way and it can't be done under the table because of the CIA's kind of role and reputation during the 1957-1958 rebellions in the outer islands.

Q: I would think looking at the political structure and the geographic structure of Indonesia, if you left the CIA to its devices... I mean it could be the biggest sandbox for playing in you could think of, including Asia.

LA PORTA: Everybody who traveled in Indonesia was suspected of being a CIA agent. For example, I went to Papua as an embassy political officer; in fact I was still the consular officer and I was transitioning into the political job within months. I went out there and I had some consular duties to perform: (1) we had reports of some people who claimed that they had remains of Michael Rockefeller who had been lost off the South coast of Papua; (2) there were missionaries who were killed in the central highlands and who disappeared (we ascertained pretty reliably that their bodies were dismembered and the remains were partially devoured as was the local tradition); and (3) we had some other interests, as well as to observe the act of free choice or self-determination under UN auspices. When I came back from that trip I was called into the foreign ministry. I didn't have a clue as to what was gong on and they wanted to know what my activities in Papua were. The ambassador got a call from Foreign Minister Adam Malik saying that I was spying there and was dealing with enemies of the state. It may well have been that a driver of a vehicle that I hired in one town had been associated with the Free Papua Movement, but I don't know. My activities and everything I did were totally transparent.

I had to write an ex post facto account of where I went, who I talked to and so forth for the ambassador so that he could take it to the foreign minister. The accusations against me were brought by the intelligence people. Curiously, this incident cropped up again when I was in Sumatra a decade later. I was consul in Medan when an Indonesian military officer went berserk and wanted political asylum. The chief of national intelligence, who had been deputy chief during my Papua visit, accused me of having been a CIA on the basis of that 1969 visit. Things stick to you and I'm sure that people in Jakarta today say, "Oh, yeah, Al La Porta. We knew he was a CIA guy because of these incidents."

Q: You were in the political section from when to when?

LA PORTA: 1969 to 1970.

Q: Are there any other things we should cover during this period?

LA PORTA: I think we've covered quite enough and unfortunately I've strayed into modern history.

Q: That's all right. I keep bringing you back. There are overlaps and I think it's important to get at them. What did you do in '70 then?

LA PORTA: My father became ill, having been diagnosed with cancer in February 1970, and the family believed that the medical assessment was he wasn't gong to live for very long. Personnel said that, since you're due for a transfer in the middle of 1970 anyway, we'll curtail you and we'll reassign you in the Department. We left at the end of February in 1970, three or four months short of my regular rotation.

Other people packed us out. We came straight back because nobody knew how serious my father was, but certainly the doctor's recommendation was to come back sooner. I was assigned to IO.

Q: International organizations.

LA PORTA: International Organizations bureau.

Q: Just to finish up, what happened with your father?

LA PORTA: Well, as it turned out he lived for a while, then he died of cancer in early December of 1970.

Q: So, you were in IO from 1970 until when?

LA PORTA: From May 1970 until the summer of 1972.

Q: Who was the Assistant Secretary of IO at that time?

LA PORTA: Sam De Palma. A wonderful man. Just a gem.

Q: Today is the 5th of May, the Cinco de Mayo, 2004. You were in IO from '70 to '72, International Organizations Affairs. You said Sam De Palma was the Assistant Secretary at the time. What was his background and how did he operate?

LA PORTA: Sam De Palma was a Foreign Service Officer, but he spent most of his career on the multilateral side. In fact one of the few people in the Department that in those years in the '50s, '60s and through the '70s who really had a deep background in multilateral affairs and the UN system, the other was Joe Sisco. Sam died last year and I think was extremely well regarded in the UN system. He was a man who was scrupulously honest and very considerate of everybody including junior officers in his own bureau. I had not exactly welcomed this assignment because I had wanted to go into the Asia bureau or do something connected with Asia since I had made up my mind to continue on that track. An assignment in IO was brand new and it wasn't something that I had really countenanced before, but since I was coming back off cycle, it was one that was hard to overcome. There weren't a lot of jobs around the East Asia bureau so that you could broker something else.

I wound up working in probably the least well known and most arcane part of the IO bureau, Science and Technology Affairs. It was a very small office. It was headed by Foreign Service Officer Bill Kerrigan. He reported to John McDonald who is still alive and well and working in conflict resolution. John was the office director for the economic and social side of the bureau. In IO, you had UN political affairs as you have now, but all of the UN specialized areas and independent agencies were clumped together on the econ side.

Bill Kerrigan again was a prince. He was a delightful man as was John McDonald. They were probably was the strongest team of multilateralists that you could have had at that time in the Department. The Science and Technology Division consisted of five officers, but we only had two officers doing the five jobmyself and another officer named Bob Kent who is now deceased. Basically Bob and I divided the science agencies between us so I had the International Atomic Energy Agency, WMO, WHO, and a few small independent organizations like the International Hydrographic Commission. We had law of the sea, which was really in its infancy at that time, as well as the environment which was also in its infancy. We handled all of the ECOSOC, UN General Assembly second committee issues and certain third committee issues dealing with science, the environment, energy and natural resources.

Later Bill Kerrigan was succeeded by a veteran of the science bureau because. We handled the multilateral side, but SCT (as it was called at that time) did bilateral science. John Trevithick, who was an office director in SCT, came to IO to head up all of the economic and social affairs. John was a very good practitioner in science and his great advantage was that he knew everybody in the Washington science community. Our job basically was to write the position papers that were cleared with UNP, the regional bureaus, and other agencies. We convened interagency groups basically for each significant multilateral agency that developed the policy approaches for the annual general conferences or the governing boards. We also served on delegations. Very soon after I arrived in IO, I went off to Nairobi to attend one of the preparatory meetings for what later became the Stockholm Environment Conference. I went to the International Atomic Energy Agency general conference and several board meetings as a member of the U.S. delegation. And during the General Assembly season we went up to New York and spent usually two or three weeks working on our agenda items.

Q: Were you looking at the peaceful use of nuclear energy or were you worried about proliferation?

LA PORTA: There was a big proliferation concern. In fact, a lot of the things we see today about the use and abuse of peaceful uses in India and in Pakistan even at that early time were surfacing. My recollection is that in the Department at the time there were two views, one that peaceful uses were good. The U.S. Atomic Energy Agency and the AEC was promoting nuclear energy, but I think that even then the Political Military bureau and some others had very strong views about safeguards. Effective safeguards were a front burner issue in the context of the future of the NPT.

Q: Non-proliferation.

LA PORTA: The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The Non-Proliferation Treaty has a wonderful mechanism in it that it has to be reviewed every ten years which in bureaucratic terms means that governments are always redoing it and surfacing proposals to amend it at the next review conference, etc. That was also part of our work. Let's say, less significant perhaps or let's say less glamorous was the work that we did with the WMO and WHO.

Q: WMO is?

LA PORTA: The World Meteorological Organization, World Health Organization, the ITU, International Telecommunications Union, plus we had a few other agencies that I can't even remember the initials of. We had an exciting time, because we were two or three officers at most we were always running from pillar to post trying to get the latest conferences staffed and so forth. It was a good period and I will have to say professionally that I learned about multilateral politics. What is stunning and to behold is that not much had changed in the way the UN system had done business over the years. Talking to some colleagues recently, the things that they face in the General Assembly and the issues that have to be negotiated by UN political affairs, etc. are remarkably familiar.

Q: Was the Israeli development of nuclear weapons an issue?

LA PORTA: Yes and no. I think at that time there were indications that the Israelis had a scientific program, but not something that had gone beyond that. This was 1970. You're talking about the safeguards over scientific laboratories but the nuclear reactors that were then being built in India and Pakistan were far more of a concern. Those were probably the two big ticket items.

A lot of the other nuclear energy issues such as South Africa, really weren't on anybody's radar screen that I can recall, but at the UN there was a lot of tension with the Russians and the Eastern Bloc in general over their programs that were not safeguarded were only lightly safeguarded. No one had any confidence that the East Germans, for example, were showing all and as we know they had not only a substantial scientific program, but a very ambitious program of building reactors. Questions always came up in the IAEA board and in the General Conference as to the effectiveness of those safeguards.

Q: How about the Law of the Sea? Was this an issue?

LA PORTA: Law of the Sea was becoming very hotly contested. The Law of the Sea debate had a Jekyll and Hyde characteristic about it. On the one hand, it has been something that you gave to the lawyers and the lawyers fought and chewed over it and the lawyers every few years came back with proposals to put before governments for consideration. Then governments became engaged on very high levels.

On the other hand, we had to deal a lot in the General Assembly and in a number of bodies with what I would call the practical issues of Law of the Sea, how the maps are drawn, what kind of limitations and territorial claims are shown or accepted, and so forth. From major to minor organizations, including the UN General Assembly itself you would always have issues surface about territorial jurisdictions. In particular, there was a growing number of countries led pretty much by Braziand this bloc still led by Braziwhich took exception to virtually anything that the developed world and the lawyers worked out. In other words, the desire of the developed countries, and particularly the advanced developed countries, as distinct from small island states, became expert on blocking UNGA action.

Q: This is with regard to their fishing?

LA PORTA: Not only fishing, but control of natural resources and general transit issues. We also had always the straits transit problems, even though straits transit normally was governed by its own set of conventions. You did have real issues in the Malacca Strait, in the straits of Indonesia and several other tight quarters where subsequently the IMO, which was not then yet a full fledged organization, was being asked to study traffic separation and other modalities for ship passage, such as warning, notification, safety at sea, piracy and so forth. The IMO, International Maritime Organization, was in its infancy and was basically at the level of an international study group. Because of a lot of the competing claims and demands by the LDCs, lesser developed countries, led by Brazil and a few others, they kept pressing maritime issues for international action.

Q: Were we talking about seabed mining at the time?

LA PORTA: Absolutely.

Q: Had the Global Explorer appeared on the scene?

LA PORTA: That was later. The deep seabed mining issues, the United States claimed, were in international waters and therefore not subject to claims and interests of any neighboring states. I remember we wrote a lot of position papers defending deep seabed mining. On the other hand, I think that we had also at that time a growing group of environmentalists who were beginning to raise serious questions. For example, there were a large number of people, including in the State Department as well as the National Science Foundation, who did not want any deep seabed mining activities close to Antarctica. The Arctic was subject to pretty much national jurisdiction and there were fewer problems there until you got to the offshore islands, the Aleutian Islands and a few other areas. It was a seminal period for the real work on both the environment and the Law of the Sea, which came to fruition four to six years later with the initial world conference in those areas.

Close to the end of my assignment in IO, I was invited by Chris Herter, who was then the special assistant to the Secretary for International Environmental affairs, to become the secretary of the delegation for the Stockholm Conference which was projected for 1974. I met Chris Herter a few months ago, in the beginning of this year (2004), and I reminded him that he had asked me to do this but I had declined with great respect and regret. I had my next assignment set and wanted to get back to Asia. I will have to say that again multilateral affairs was one of those things in the Service that tends to stick to your ribs. In other words, once you've done it, you are able to track it and deal with issues in the multilateral arena. As I've said, the issues just don't change that much from year to year.

Q: Did you get involved with whaling or was that out of your area?

LA PORTA: We did whaling. The International Whaling Convention was then in place and there was an annual but less formal meeting of the whaling countries. It was rather amusing because, later on during one visit to Tokyo, I went to visit one of the notorious whale restaurants where you eat raw whale meat, which was a wonderful specialty. The Japanese position on whaling hasn't changed one bit in all these years.

Q: In these international things, we seem to go with international agreements and then all of a sudden all of our commercial interests start getting involved. I'm talking about American commercial interests and this is parallel to other countries. Did you find this? All of a sudden you're up against people saying "wait a minute"?

LA PORTA: I think at that time, and it may be a generational thing, multilateral affairs was not a great compelling economic interest except in a few narrow areas like seabed mining. The approach of the International Organizations bureau and SCT would be to basically bring the companies in, whether they were energy companies or minerals companies or some others, to talk about issues of environmental safety, the safety of big tanker and warship passage, etc. At that time you also had the first work being done on the double hulled tankers which came along by the mid '70s. The companies were in my view remarkably constructive during those years because they understood there were real safety issues.

Q: I know when I watched the French news in 2003 and 2004 the French continued to be outraged and quite rightly so by obsolesce and single hulled tankers breaking up and sometimes just splitting in two along their coast.

LA PORTA: It is a serious problem, but I think even today accidents do happen. Nothing is ever sure and that's probably the best argument for taking prudent action multilaterally. By and large there was pretty good harmony among the developed world on most of these issues. The contention was with what later became the Group of '77, the G-77, of developing countries, which had their own demands in the economic area. Sometimes those demands were not consistent because they didn't want other people poaching or involved in their waters. They wanted to do the development themselves. The offshore oil industry, which again was only really beginning to have a real impact, had a big effect on energizing the LDCs to take strong positions in the international organizations. I recall that the ringleader of the developing nation bloc in the General Assembly and ECOSOC at that time was a Brazilian diplomat by the name of Pinto. I can assure you that the amount of jokes and a little derision that we had in our office for Mr. Pinto was significant.

On the matter of coordinating U.S. positions for the multilateral agencies, the biggest problems were not with the regional bureaus or subject matter experts, but with the lawyerwhether in State, DOD, Interior or elsewhere. International lawyers, or those that pretend to be, often harbored hidden motiveoften claiming precedent that really didn't exist or was shaky, and they wanted to be in the position of making "new law." This sometimes came at the expense of getting tangible progress on difficult issues and maybe it was vanity on their part that they could stall or complicate actions.

Q: Well, then you left IO after two years in '72 is that right?

LA PORTA: I left in the summer of '72 and went to Malaysia.

Q: Well, then you went to Malaysia in '72. You were there from when to when?

LA PORTA: I was there for three years, the middle of 1972 to the middle of 1975. I knew the ambassador when he was DCM in Jakarta. He was Marshall Green's DCM, Jack Lydman. Having worked for Jack as consular section chief and having been associated with him when I was in the political section in Jakarta, he was receptive to my joining him in Kuala Lumpur. I went to the political section and essentially had the same kind of portfolio that I had in Indonesia: Muslims, regional affairs (in Malaysian terms that included Sabah and Sarawak), relations with Indonesia, ASEAN and also youth affairs.

The political counselor at that time was John Helble, a veteran East Asia officer, and my colleague and Chinese affairs expert was Murray Zinoman. We reported to the DCM, Bob Dillon, with whom I was later privileged to serve with in Ankara, Turkey. Overall we had a strong and competent embassy. Jack Lydman was a steady hand, to the point that a few people found him somewhat cold-blooded and aloof.

Q: Well, let's look at Malaysia at this time. Could you sort of describe the political situation, the government that you'd be dealing with?

LA PORTA: The prime minister when I arrived was Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was known as the father of Malaysian independence in 1963. Between 1961 and 1963 there was that strange federation with Singapore in which neither the Tunku, as he was known, and the prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, were very comfortable with each other. Malaysia peaceably went its own way in 1963. Tunku Abdul Rahman represented the Malay aristocracy that had been nurtured, if not coddled, by the British during their nearly 100 years of control. He had a very patrician view of governing and was trusted by the Chinese and Indians, but not by Malay "Young Turks" who wanted to assert their political primacy. Fortunately the British left a number of very strong institutions, one of which was the civil service. They were very good, and they are very good to this day. Secondly, the British left a strong educational system with a growing university system. Thirdly, they imparted a sense that merit counts in that society, whether a meritocracy in government service, the private sector, the educational system or whatever.

Q: Wasn't there a problem, I don't know the area, but what I gather there's this gap between the Chinese who always, I mean, even in our country, are extremely hard working and the Malays who one thinks of as being more laid back. In a meritocracy I would think this would cause a problem.

LA PORTA: The British approach had been to consign the economy to the Chinese, give government over to the Malays and keep the ethnic Indian migrant population in the agriculture sector and in petty trading. The British ultimately didn't do the country any favors by having this compartmentalization, but during the period of colonial rule it worked. In other words, there were rough understandings that the Chinese community would be ascendant in the economic sphere; to the extent that any aspiring Malay business people wanted to make a fortune that was fine, but that basically that's the way things were politically. For example, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) represented urbanized English speaking and Chinese speaking Chinese, while the UMNO United Malays National Organization) which itself initially was a coalition of several Malay organizations, represented the Malays. The Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) represented the Indian community, thus there was a comfortable division of labor and politics that the Tunku brought to independence in 1963.

By the early '70s the system of consensus in Malay politics had broken down in the racial violence of May 1969 and you had activist fringe groups beginning to appear. A chauvinistic Chinese party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) began to launch appeals to lower class, Chinese-educated Chinese who claimed basically "You are not getting your due in this system. You're held to a subordinate status. You need to get more of the benefits; the health care system isn't operating in your favor. You're having difficulty getting your kids into schools. You're not allowed to teach Chinese in the state schools. You're dominated, moreover, by these Taipeians in the Malaysian Chinese association who controlled the large economic conglomerates."

There were a couple of radical splinter groups in the Malay side. There was the People's Party that attempted to take a Marxist approach. They never got anywhere but they made some noise until they were outlawed. But, more seriously beginning in the early 1970s and significantly by 1973 and '74, Islamic oriented student groups emerged. The deputy prime minister was discredited and later jailed, Anwar Ibrahim, started an organization called ABIM, the Malaysian Islamic Students Union, at the University of Malaya. Other organizations were started at the State Islamic University and on other campuses to represent Islamic students, Looking back on it, they were less Islamic but more anti-establishment, so they challenged the regime of the Tunku, the old line politics, the party elders the ones that had grown up under the British and received their education largely in British universities. They wanted Malaysia for Malays, for the indigenous population. This was a very formative period because by the late '70s and '80s these organizations grew and propagated fundamentalist Islam, Islamic revival, and imported religious movements. So, by the mid '80s they were quite prominent indeed.

Q: You were looking at the Muslim side of things, did you have contact with the Imams, the Mullahs, in other words the religious leaders? Were they important at that point?

LA PORTA: Yes and no. For the most part, they were not important politically in most of Malaysia, except in the Northeastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu and to some extent in two other Northern states, Kedah and Perlis. A chauvinist Muslim party developed called the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party; its English initials are PMIP and they are still the Islamic opposition to UMNO, the ruling Malay party in the National Front Coalition. The Mullahs were important as the teachers at a couple of Islamic universities and a couple of the Mullahs took seats in parliament so you had to deal with them. More importantly from our embassy's point of view, we really focused on the students.

My wife, who is a lawyer today, was then in the stages of finishing her law degree at George Washington University. George Washington University allowed her to take some courses for elective credit at the University of Malaya. So she joined the University of Malaya Law School. Most classes were taught in English, but a few were taught in Malay which, in light of our previous service in Indonesia, made it possible for her to take those courses. She took a course in Islamic law in Malay. She took a course in Islamic family law in Malay. She took Malaysian constitutional law. And she took criminal and other courses and she got full credit from George Washington University and fulfilled her elective requirements that way. By her going to the campus virtually everyday for classes, we got to know students of all types. It wasn't a deliberate or crass move on our part to extend our influence, but it was great in terms of developing associations and becoming familiar with the organizations.

We also had another inroad through my avocation with theater. One of my colleagues who in the political section who followed Chinese politics was Murray Zinoman; his wife Joy Zinoman, who today runs the Studio Theater on 14th Street in Washington, DC and has been enormously successful in developing what is the second largest theater company in Washington, next to Arena Stage. She's an absolutely brilliant woman, actress and acting teacher. Joy at that time taught theater at in the university. We organized a group called the Kuala Lumpur Players. It was largely comprised of young Malaysians of all ethnicities and Joy directed the plays. I was one of her actors. We got into a younger group of interesting and politically alive people. And so we had very fortunate personal contacts with younger Malaysians. Further, my neighbor was a young business executive. He was Malay and his wife was Australian; they had young children about our kids' ages. We became very close to them. He came from an establishment Malay family from the Northeast and he was in business, so through him I was able to join the Rotary Club and got to know young Malay business people.

Q: Was this a sort of a homegrown Islam or were its roots fairly strong and tied to Saudi Arabia, or anything like that?

LA PORTA: Islam in Malaysia in the early '70s and into this day had quite strong ties with the "great schools of Islam," al Azhar University in Cairo, the universities in Baghdad and Pakistan and other large religious schools and communities in the Muslim world. Malaysian religious scholars very much looked to the Middle East for their theological orientation. Therefore Malaysia tended to be, and increasingly became more and more fundamentalist in terms of adherence to the rituals in and terms of scholarship. The development of Islam in Malaysia is different than in Indonesia which tended to be more syncretic, more homegrown and developed clear lines of "Indonesianness" that separated it considerably from the mainstream of Islam as practiced in the Middle East and taught in the great Islamic universities.

In Malaysia, there were even in those days growing links with Muslim universities, movements, missionary bodies in the Middle East. Indeed, these contacts were pursued not only by Malays, but also through Indian Muslims who had contacts in India with large Islamic organizations there and schools and universities in Pakistan and other places. There was a different quality of Islam as practiced by the mainstream and what is observable today because beginning with the student movements in the early '70sthere was a ratcheting up of observance and fidelity to the tenants of the faith by the Malays in Malaysia.

Q: As to the situation during the time you were there, two things. One, were we concerned about the Muslims as a force and two, did the ruling group of Malays in the government...were they not as observant Muslims as a group that was coming up?

LA PORTA: Well, the latter characterization is certainly true. The older civil servants in government and business and elsewhere, such as the universities, were generally more relaxed about their practice of Islam. They celebrated their main holidays with ostentatious displays and spending a lot of money on festivals. Of course weddings were a great occasion to display this. I remember one time when the Tunku, the Prime Minister, came to dinner at the ambassador's and my wife and I were invited to the dinner. The Tunku not only loved roast beef in the British tradition, but he also loved lobster which is forbidden to some Muslims. We had lobster and shrimp as well. Some strict Muslims, although shrimp don't walk on the land. The Tunku always had to have the best Scotch, whereas practicing Muslims began increasingly to give up alcohol. Most upper class Malays at that time wouldn't hesitate to eat pork or ham at least in private, if not in public.

Q: Were we interested? I mean you had this as part of your brief, but was this more of just a matter of oh hey, let's divide up in society and you take that as opposed to saying we really are concerned about what's happening or we see this in the future of maybe posing a conflict for us?

LA PORTA: I think the concern with student activism in general was a very strong concern that was reflected here in Washington in the Department and in other agencies. You also had a dynamic happening on the Chinese side. This was called the Emergency wherein the Communist Party of Malaya waged an insurgency since the early 1950s. We were still seeing the remnants of it in the early '70s in the jungle areas on the border of Southern Thailand in the Northern states of Malaya. The insurgents were largely Chinese. There was a small minority of Malays who recruited into the Communist Party, but by and large they were mostly Chinese and they had direct links with the PRC and with China and kindred communist movements elsewhere in Asia. The insurgency also operated in Sarawak on the border with Indonesia. In the early '70s some remnants of armed groups were operating in the border area and interestingly those insurgents managed to co-opt some Indonesian communists as well as the Peoples Party of Brunei.

Q: What about the Malaysian influence, I mean it had a significant hunk of Borneo. How was that gong?

LA PORTA: I visited Sabah and Sarawak several times a year and I had good contacts in those state governments. Sabah was probably characterized as a semi-autocracy run by a traditional Malay chief, Tun Mustapha, who assembled quite a feudal group of Malays and non-Malays around him and manipulated virtually everything in Sabah until the late '80s. In Sarawak the situation was much more diffuse because of the state politics. There were Chinese based parties, there was a Malay based party, there were a couple of other groups that had no particular characterization. A coalition government ran Sarawak and so the Malays and the other parties had to conciliate with each other. You had three basic groups. You had the Malays; the Dayaks, which are the indigenous Borneans and the Chinese in Sarawak as well. While today nobody really questions the adherence of Sabah and Sarawak to Malaysia, by the early '70s that early questioning period that you saw in the mid '60s had worn off. There were issues with Sabah wanting more autonomy, less oversight, both politically and in governance. Sarawak was a little bit messier, interesting, but messy. I mean the politics were just a little messy.

Q: Was there any attraction of these provinces to Brunei or not?

LA PORTA: Well Brunei was the odd man out. The original British plan in 1961 for the Borneo states and Singapore and Malaysia was to incorporate Brunei into the federation but Brunei never joined. The Sultan of Brunei said, no, I'm not gong to have anything to do with that. I'm going to sit here on my little pile of oil. He didn't know that he had gas, but the LNG (liquefied natural gas)was there too. It may have been in the mid '70s there was a book that was published by the author of Clockwork Orange, Anthony Burgess, called Devil of a State. It was a novel that was crudely based on Brunei. It was rather amusing because it characterized this very tight state ruled by this autocratic elderly sultan. The old sultan kept his ties with the UK and was always in favor in London and had a good audience there, but he just said, no, I can't get along with Lee Kuan Yew and the Tunku.

Q: What about Lee Kuan Yew? Is he sort of sticking to his island?

LA PORTA: Not really. It was always said of Lee Kuan Yew, and I don't know if the quote is historically accurate or not, you know, if I only had Indonesia to govern, just think what I could do. I think the personal antagonisms and the bad blood between Lee Kuan Yew, the Tunku and other Malaysian leaders certainly contributed to a lot of the stress, and sometimes created stress, during that period of the '60s and '70s. My view is that the relationships really didn't settle down and become quite pragmatic until somewhere in the '80s. I think you always have had this kind of uncomfortable elbowing and you had points of contention which are still not settled today over water rights, for example, because much of Singapore's water supply comes from Malaysia. Then you had issues of the traffic across the causeway. You had issues of overflight rights including planes overflying Singapore, and planes coming through Malaysian air space to land in Singapore airports. Also, Singapore's armed forces found themselves in Malaysian waters as soon as they poked their nose out of their bases. You had a lot of difficult issues that recurred with nauseating regularity every year or every couple of years, so nothing is ever settled.

Q: You were there during the end game in Vietnam. How did that play in Malaysia?

LA PORTA: I think that Vietnam was viewed on the popular level in mainland Southeast Asia with a great deal of suspicion as to U.S. motives. In other words, like more modern parallels in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was viewed as an attempt of the U.S. to extend its hegemony. That is certainly the line the Chinese took in criticizing the United States, so that even ostensibly friendly governments have echoed that line.

On the other hand, in Malaysia, you had also a layer of people in the bureaucracthe army, the security services, and some others in governmenand also some in the political parties who did buy into the notion of falling dominoes. It was hard for them to articulate publicly that "We're a domino. Here we are, come and get us. Come and give us to the communists." Malaya, having fought its own communist insurgency, was very mindful of the potential for encroachments by the Vietnamese.

These feelings were exacerbated by the refugee flow which we began to see in Malaysia beginning in the early '70s even before the fall of Saigon. The United States had to set up a refugee program. We had to stand up our own program before the days of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) because there were hard cases and a large outflow from Indochina. There were a lot of difficulties with the Malaysian authorities even at that early period who refused to recognize that a refugee problem existed, even to the point of causing the death of hundreds who fled because they were not allowed to land in Malaysia. The problem was compounded in the late '70s and through the '80s by the Khmer Rouge takeover in Cambodia as well. There were really dislikes over the refugee situation in not wanting to absorb alien populations from Indochina and absorb their problempolitical problems primarily. Also, as far as ASEAN that had been founded in 1967 was concerned, the ASEAN response was to create kind of a bubble around the original five ASEAN nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines) and to try to keep at these external forces.

Q: At this time, I mean in talking around the embassy and all and political sections elsewhere, did we feel that enough time had passed to allow the dominoes in that area to get stronger, that they weren't as vulnerable as we certainly felt when we started to intervene in '64.

LA PORTA: There was a strong feeling that the entire region was vulnerable. We also had to engage with the Malaysians on the use of Penang and other places for R&R for our forces. We also used Singapore for R&R so we had large numbers of soldiers. We did a lot of procurement in Malaysia and Singapore in particular, but also in Thailand. We had big bases in Thailand that were sources of problems with the Thai populace as well as depending on the political attitudes of successive Thai governments. Then you had the Philippine issue which by and large the Indonesians and Malaysians and Singaporeans didn't care too much about. In fact, the Singapore armed forces by the mid '70s were using some of our base facilities in the Philippines for their own maneuvering and training. From the standpoint of our policies and attitudes in terms of what we conveyed or what Washington felt, there were significant strong concerns about the ability of these nations to withstand serious communist pressures.

Q: Well, at that time we saw China as being an expansive communist power, is that right?

LA PORTA: Absolutely. I think that the concern over Chinese espionage over other kinds of Chinese influence in the region very greatly conditioned our attitude toward Southeast Asia. It also became, as radical Islam is today, a justification for our doing a lot in terms of assistance, wanting to leverage help for refugee relief issues, military assistance and trying to encourage even at that early date some form of ASEAN military cooperation.

Q: Student demonstrations in October 1973 brought down the Thanom-Praphat government in Thailand. Were there any reverberations in Malaysia?

LA PORTA: Frankly, I can recollect there was little reaction or concern in Malaysia where the students were far less active and there was little pressure on the government. We (the embassy) were more worried than the Malaysians were.

Q: Saigon fell on 30 April 1975. Were there any reverberations in Malaysia?

LAPPORTA: There was a certain "I told you so" attitude that was particularly reflected in the press. Our political relations did not change much.

Q: Were there any, we sort of covered the water. Were there any sort of major incidents or concerns during your time there?

LA PORTA: Yes. One of the biggest incidents occurred a few weeks before I was due to leave in July of 1975. Basically the Japanese red army came to call.

Q: Oh, yes.

LA PORTA: The Japanese red army, radical homegrown communist / extremists / anarchists, had been surveilling our embassy which was located in the top three and a half floors of the AIA Life Insurance Building on Jalan Ampang. Also resident in that building were the Japanese Embassy, the Australian Embassy and the Swedish Embassy, which partially shared a floor with our consular section, the ninth floor. We had floors 10, 11, 12 and the penthouse.

Five Japanese red army operatives, who were well-armed with explosives and weapons, seized our consular section and the other offices on the ninth floor of the building. They killed two building guards and other people were wounded in the takeover. The embassy offices were open (this occurred during business hours), so our consular section was full. Employees of the insurance company and the Swedish Embassy, in all about 55 people, were taken hostage by the red army types. Most of them were grouped into the few rooms that we had for our consular section. True to their threats, they did put plastique around the main uprights supports of the building and in the elevator shaft. It was morning when this occurred and we were in an embassy staff meeting. We heard that something was going on down in the consular section and we didn't know quite what it was. It was not very long before we began to hear the demands of the Japanese red army kidnappers. What they wanted was to force the release of a number of their followers who were in prison in Japan as well as to remove some of their followers to Libya and Algeria. Those were the favored places. When you had a terrorist, you sent them to Algeria or Libya, because that's where they all wanted to go. Political exiles conveniently went to Sweden.

The negotiations went on for almost four days. The Malaysians, I will have to say and I think by everybody's recollections were admirable. The interior ministry, the minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie moved in. It took him about a day to figure out what was happening. I think he was out of the city traveling, but came back and took charge. The Malaysian police set up an operations center in the building that was quite effective. The transportation minister, Tan Sri Manickavasagam, was also involved because they wanted aircraft. They wanted an aircraft to be ready at the Kuala Lumpur Airport to fly them to the Middle East. We immediately evacuated the embassy.

Q: Did you get out?

LA PORTA: We evacuated the embassy but several of us stayed behind to keep communications with Washington open. The station chief, an economic officer, myself and a couple of other officers stayed, while the Chargï¿½, Bob Dillon, went off and set up the command post at the Ambassador's residence according to our emergency plans. So those plans worked. We had a working radio voice network and we began reporting to Washington, to State's Operations Center. We had the traditional open telephone line as well. We kept filing reports on schedule. My job in that thing was to be in the embassy, to manage the communications and to do the reporting. I would get reports from our command post, from the chargï¿½, and other officers that we had stationed with the Malaysian command post. The economic officer who was with us was Dick Jackson, who was in charge of the telephones to be in touch with the terrorists mainly because he had a wonderful low-key manner and telephone voice. He was quiet, reassuring, a good listener, and so forth. In the chancery, the station chief was the senior person aboard. We had a military attachï¿½ with us and fortuitously we had a diplomatic security technician visiting at the time. He was an electronics type. He was able to run wires down and put microphones down into the airshaft to the ninth floor and set up tape recorders to monitor any ambient noise. This was extremely valuable because we were able to pick up the voices of people, both the captives as well as some of the captors.

Q: Who were the American captives?

LA PORTA: The American captives were our consul, Bob Stebbens, and one other officer who was working in that section at the time. There were also four FSNs, but U.S. official captives were only two in number. There was a group of about half a dozen Americans who were in the consular section for services as well as the Malaysian consular clientele. There were also people of several other nationalities who either worked for the insurance company and Swedish Embassy on that floor. The embassy also placed liaison officers with the Canadian and Japanese embassies in the building.

Q: The Japanese would be intimately involved in this. How did they work?

LA PORTA: They were pretty invisible. To the extent that they were involved, it was a Tokyo problem, in essence they said, I'm sorry, we can't do anything, talk to Tokyo. It was a remarkable case of denial in the sense that they didn't want to play. Their embassy felt no particular responsibility and whether issues relating to the hostages and demands of the red army people were going to met or not, that was all a Tokyo problem, not theirs. Ultimately, what happened was that the government in Tokyo did decide to make a commercial aircraft available. They did take a couple of red army captives out of jail. There were several others who didn't want to leave jail in Japan. So, they loaded this plane up with a few officials and a couple of captives. They flew it into Kuala Lumpur Airport.

The minister of transportation offered himself as a substitute hostage for the hostages that were in our building. But the red army cadres loaded all of the hostages in buses. They went to the airport. The minister substituted himself for the hostages at the airport. He got in the plane; one or two officials went along with him. The red army cadres and the official government hostages took off for Egypt. There were extraordinary problems in getting air clearances to expedite the travel over the Indian Ocean especially as the Indians didn't want to let them through. The Sri Lankans didn't want to let them fly over. They got to Africa, skirting the Middle East, but again the Egyptians said, no, we won't give you air clearance. They forced the plane to land, I think in Ethiopia, where it was refueled and took off again, finally arriving in Algeria where the rest of the red army people joined them. Basically they were recycled into the international terrorist stream. Several were recaptured later, but a couple were involved in other incidents.

From the human point of view, there were a lot of things that were remarkable about the whole experience. After we had established contact with the red army terrorists, they wanted food. My wife and some other embassy people we could talk to, because our civilian telephone lines were still open, went to Kentucky Fried Chicken and A&W Root Beer downstairs in the building and got food and sent it up to the ninth floor for the hostages. They also sent us up food. After a couple of days they allowed somebody to bring up clean laundry. It was truly a remarkable experience with let's say the dangerous side of the Foreign Service. It was an extraordinary example of how people work together. It was also an extraordinary terrorist incident because almost no sooner than it happened, it was forgotten and does not crop up in any of the kind of Department listings of terrorist incidents. That to me is also symptomatic, pardon me if I editorialize of where our government's head has been about terrorism for 35 years. Incidents occur, they're easily forgotten, not much is done except some tweaking around the edges and we lurch from incident to incident which are becoming more serious and deadly all the time.

Q: How did people get out? They had, did they go out from helicopter or what?

LA PORTA: From the building?

Q: Yes.

LA PORTA: The terrorists allowed the use of the freight elevator, which was on the side of the main bank of elevators. We determined afterward they had indeed booby trapped the main elevators, but not the freight elevator. They may not have know about that initially, but they didn't booby trap that one. We were able to get supplies and ultimately, as the days went on, one or two people were able to get out.

Q: Was there a problem in communicating with the Japanese captors particularly that they didn't speak much English.

LA PORTA: They had two people who did speak English well enough. Dick Jackson also spoke some Japanese. He was not fluent in Japanese according to my recollection, but he spoke enough to at least conduct a courtesy conversation. I think that one of the important things that we observed, as we now know from many other hostage incidents, the criticality of the "degree of confidence" between the captors and the negotiators. In other words, if they have somebody on the other end of the phone or the radio whom they think that they can trust. We very carefully went through down the SOP (standard operating procedure) and said, only Dick Jackson will have contact with them, nobody else. It worked.

We also had Dick on the phone to Washington to talk to the psychiatrists and hostage experts back here. One of the aspects that was not endearing about the whole incident was Henry Kissinger, whom I believe by that time was Secretary of State.

Q: He was Secretary of State.

LA PORTA: Kissinger said we are not going to deal with the hostages in any way, shape or form. We're not going to ask for any special consideration for any of the hostages. He just simply compounded the degree of difficulty in getting a solution.

Q: Well, I mean this has come up a couple of times in my interviews about, well I mean the cartoon of assassination of the PLO over our ambassador and ____ and Kurt Moore. We made that; I mean the same thing with Kissinger and Nixon. They said, we're not going to deal, it's this tough attitude. I think there was another one in Mexico. It sounds great, but you eventually do deal in some way.

LA PORTA: Exactly.

Q: This is posturing which endangers lives and that group was particularly susceptible to posturing.

LA PORTA: That is exactly how we felt. That he was endangering the lives of all of us. If the hostages had taken that seriously, or had really believed it, they could have blown the whole building apart. I think that's a particularly unfortunate feature of that period. Two other things stood out about that incident. One is that while we were holed up and sitting above the area that was held by the terrorists, my replacement arrived in Kuala Lumpur. His name was Scott Butcher. Scott and his family arrived at the airport and said, oh, gee whiz, that's surprising there's nobody here to meet us. Well, he and his family took a cab and they set out for the embassy. They figured well, a communications glitch or something like that. All of a sudden he came into the downtown area and there's a big cordon around the area where the AIA building is. He finally got in touch with someone but I'm not sure how and found out this terrorist incident was gong on. In the last two days of the hostage crisis, before Scott was able to get into the embassy and joined us upstairs. Scott had just come from serving in the Operations Center. He was traveling when the incident happened, but it was terrific to have somebody who had that experience who knew all the players in Washington, who knew what they wanted in terms of information and was able to help us "work" the Washington end. The first thing you do in any terrorist incident is to keep a very detailed log of everything, every telephone call, every communication, nobody talks unless it's recorded on paper or in other ways.

The other thing on the downside was the behavior of the media. The media in Malaysia were okay, but the newspapers back here in the U.S. were just jumping all over the place. Number one they had to figure out where Malaysia was, but also, once it became known who was in the embassy and so forth, a lot of the newspapers, the New York Times and Herald Tribune in New York and Newsday in particular, started harassing our relatives. My wife's parents were called by newspapers out in the Midwest and my mother was harassed mercilessly for details. She was told by my wife not to say anything as anything you can say might be sensitive or harmful. After we left Malaysia and I came back, prior to my next assignment, I made a formal protest to the publisher of Newsday and I did get an apology for that harassment. Maybe it's one of these things where terrorist incidents were new at that time, but certainly the appetite of the press for getting information at all costs, human and otherwise, was certainly evident.

Q: One question, or was there anything else, any other thing?

LA PORTA: I think those were the main highlights. Looking back on it and I think everybody in the mission felt that the role played by our chargï¿½, Bob Dillon, who was the DCM, was absolutely brilliant. Bob has had a distinguished career in Middle Eastern affairs and by personality, by quiet leadership, and by keeping his cool, he was able to deal very effectively with the Malaysians. Even Henry Kissinger's pronouncements didn't have as much effect as they might have.

Q: I would imagine he or someone would have a problem with dealing with the families there, your wife included and all.

LA PORTA: Well, Bob Stebbens, our consul, had a wife and two children. It was very difficult for her and for I think the embassy rallied. My wife stayed with his wife and we were good friends as Bob worked for me earlier in Indonesia. Again, all the things you were supposed to do worked. The families looked after the families. People behaved in a good way. Our communications worked. Our SOP was right. We followed the book. We communicated to beat the band. We really did. We made sure that every detail was given and known. We had a concentrated liaison effort with the Japanese, and the Malaysia operation center; other things were very professionally done and went well.

Q: Okay, we're going to pick up in 1975 when you left Malaysia. You sort of went out with a bang.

LA PORTA: And came back to something of a rest to learn Turkish at the Foreign Service Institute.

Q:: How did you go about getting your next assignment?

LA PORTA: My assignment to Turkey was not entirely expected. I was interested in the Middle East and North Africa and what personnel was offering was a pol-mil job in the embassy in Ankara. It was a very attractive offer and I wanted to do pol-mil work, although I was not entirely sure I wanted to relocate to Washington for only one year to study Turkish.

Q: You went to Turkish training when?

LA PORTA: In the late summer of 1975.

Q: Is that a year course?

LA PORTA: Yes, the long course, 11 months until June of the following year.

Q: How did you find Turkish as a language to learn and all?

LA PORTA: Well, until I ran into Mongolian, I thought it was the hardest language that anyone had ever invented. It was a daunting experience to go from either romance languages or relatively benign Asian languages (not Chinese, Japanese or Korean) to something like Turkish. I will have to say that it was probably one of the most mind bending experiences I've ever had. Even a very good friend of mine, Irwin von den Steiner, another retired officer.

Q: I know Irwin, yes.

LA PORTA: ...who was a native speaker of German, found Turkish to be very difficult, although the syntax similarities with German are very great. Irwin, who was very expert at putting together, as we used to call them, straight-backward sentences, had a lot of trouble with Turkish. That aside, I will have to say again one of the big strengths of the Foreign Service Institute is in its individual long term language teachers who are just so good and so proficient. This was the experience I had with Indonesian and those two instructors are still at FSI. I now had a situation with Turkish in which we had an instructor, but maybe not the best linguist, but our principal Turkish instructor was a lady at that time who was in her late '50s, but very proficient. She has now passed away. What you need when you go to post is to be well enough equipped, especially even in one of the hardest languages like Turkish, to cope. I always felt pretty confident of my ability to get along in Turkish.

Q: So, you went out to Turkey in what, '76?

LA PORTA: In the summer of 1976. My wife graduated from George Washington Law School in 1976, right after that she was admitted to the Supreme Court Bar and we packed our bags and left.

Q: When you got there in the summer of '76, what was the situation in Turkey, sort of domestically and then vis-ï¿½-vis the United States?

LA PORTA: In '76 it was a relatively settled period. Suleyman Demirel was Prime Minister. He was later a little less than a year later replaced by Bulent Ecevit. You had a relatively stable period in Turkish politics where you had the two ruling parties, the Justice Party and the Social Democrat Party who were relatively equal in strength. The jokers in the pile were terrorist elements or the extreme leftist parties who were outside the legitimate political realm. You had the Motherland Party, which was a Nazi party of the extreme right, and you had the National Salvation Party of Necmettin Erbakan who later became prime minister representing the Muslim interests.

Basically the political field was dominated by the two mainstream parties and if they couldn't do it individually they always found some way to along bring allies with them. The challenge to Turkey at that time was whether Turkey was going to modernize or improve its competitive position sufficiently in order to break the stranglehold of the old statist system, mainly huge publicly owned companies and inefficient banks. But the statist system in Turkey, which kind of was a product of World War II and socialism in the 1950s, left an economic system that, while it functioned on a certain level in order to keep daily livelihood turning over, it was not creating any wealth and was not investing in needed areas such as more modern education and the infrastructure including the power system. By mid-1977, a year after I had arrived in Turkey, incredible economic strains and hardships begin to emerge and that led to the economic collapse of 1979-1980, then the reintervention of the military into Turkish politics. I guess it is a somewhat bizarre footnote of history to come back to looking at Turkish affairs in close quarters when I was stationed in Naples during the preceding couple of years to find that the same old forces were still there. Demirel was president and Ecevit was still running his party until he was forced to retire for medical reasons. These guys had incredible staying power.

Q: Just like Cyprus.

LA PORTA: That was a point I was going to mention next. Rauf Denktash is now building his own dynasty with his son in Northern Cyprus, the so-called Turkish Federation of Northern Cyprus. The Cyprus issue was the single biggest overhang in not only the U.S. relationship, but in Turkey's relationship with the outside world. Like so many disputes that are territorial and ethno-religious in nature, they're never completely enough understood in terms of the ebb and flow of international politics. Basically neither the Greek Cypriot regime in Cyprus nor the Turkish regime in the north has covered itself with any glory through the long span of years.

Consequently you have groups of people behaving badly whether they're in Athens, Nicosia or in Northern Cyprus or wherever. You have gotten locked into a kind of a Pavlovian situation where you have a challenge and response. If X happens, then there has to be a Y response. If A happens, there has to be a B response because everybody's locked into a situation in which there's little or no movement. When I went to Turkey, fortunately the political section had to deal with the Cyprus problem, not the political-military section.

Q: So, you were in a POL/MIL section? Could you give us a brief description of the Embassy when you arrived. The main people in your reporting chain?

LA PORTA: The Ambassador was William Butts Macomber, a former Under Secretary for Management who, despite his one contribution of publishing and promoting Diplomacy for the 80's, was a notoriously difficult person. The DCM during my first year was Donald Bergus, a Middle East-Africanist who was not well regarded and was scorned by Macomber; the second DCM was Bob Dillon, of Kuala Lumpur fame, by then a good friend. At the end of my tour Ron Spiers, later Under Secretary for Management in the mid-80's, replaced Macomber to everyone's relief. The Spiers-Dillon team was supertwo enormously talented, honest, reasonable and personable officerthe finest of the Foreign Service.

I was a POL/MIL officer. We had three officers and one secretary at the time in the pol-mil section.. Our political military counselor was Albert Francis. The first officer who served with me was John Yates; he was later replaced by Richard A. Smith, Ras Smith. My portfolio was NATO and the other portfolio was basing arrangements. We were negotiating perpetually negotiating, eternally negotiating new base agreements with the Turks. So, my colleague, at first John Yates and then Ras Smith, were really bogged down in all of the minutiae of that, whereas I did the more fun stuff I think in terms of doing NATO relations and security assistance.

Q: You were doing this from when to when?

LA PORTA: From the summer of 1976 to the summer of 1978. It was a two year tour.

Q: How did the Turks look at NATO because a little before this I was in Athens for four years and no matter who was in power, the Greeks essentially looked at NATO as a way of getting stuff so they could stick it to the Turks. I was wondering how the Turks looked at NATO.

LA PORTA: I think the Turks, basically then as now, look at NATO as part of their defenses against Greek interests or encroachments or whatever and again, whether you're talking about air patrolling over the Aegean or any number of other kind of intra-alliance issues. You're locked into this very unfulfilling dynamic of challenge and response; no matter who is the challenger, there is always the predictable response from the other side.

Q: Well, we're still talking about a time when one, there was a Soviet Union and two, the Soviet Union militarily was very powerful. What was sort of the feeling about the Soviet menace on the military side?

LA PORTA: There is no question that the feeling in NATO, as well as in Washington and in Turkey itself, that NATO was the first line of defense against the Soviet Union. There was a qualitative difference because in 1974 the United States basically gave up the nuclear option. In other words, nuclear weapons were pulled out of Turkey and the Titan missiles and the other weapon systems that we had as a deterrent were gone. Consequently there was a qualitative difference in the way the Soviet threat was being viewed.

The Turks did not like our arbitrary removal of the nuclear weapons because they considered those systems as being essential to their defense. When we gave these up in terms of the Salt I agreement, I believe, they viewed this unilateral decision by the United States as leaving them vulnerable to intimidation by the Soviet Union. The reality was in fact quite different because Russian encroachments against Eastern Turkey, or even in the Bosporus, did not increase. Russian ground military activity and naval activity in the Bosporus did not increase. There was no significant rise in air encroachments or other kinds of incidents. This situation during the period I was there was very stable insofar in dealing with the Russians was concerned. Likewise the Caucasus was pretty quiet at that time. The kind of internal rebellions and dissidence that we see today was not in evidence significantly, although there were Turkish and Turkic minorities and the Armenians, Georgians and others certainly have had a long history of low level nationalism. From the alliance standpoint and certainly Washington's standpoint, we considered as being of equal importance Turkey's being on the front line against bad behavior in the South and East against vis-ï¿½-vis Syria, Iraq and later of course in 1978, when the real turmoil started in Iran, against extremism of the Ayatollah's regime. In Washington's view, the traditional NATO interest shifted away from the Soviet "menace" toward the containment of other forces that were considered to be undesirable.

Q: How did our military view Turkey on either the Bulgarian front or the Caucasian front as standing up to the Soviets if something were to happen?

LA PORTA: During that period and I think it's probably true from certainly the Salt I on, much, much less attention was paid to the Trans-Caucasus and European Turkey. My family and I drove from Ankara through Turkish, Greek and Bulgarian Thrace to Athens; and we also took the other route through Southern Turkey and then cross the Dardanelles from Gallipoli. The region was very benign, lots of trucks, lots of civilian activity, but certainly no hostility. There was one rather fun incident as we were driving from Canakkale, which is a ferry terminus, we drove pretty much of a full day into Kavala in Northern Greece which is in the Thessaloniki consular district. Kavala is a lovely seaport and there was and I think may still be USIA radio station sitting up on top of a mountain, which is the only thing Kavala was noted for except for its very attractive harbor. We drove into town and we finally found our hotel. It was down in the port area and we parked our car, with its Turkish license plates, out in front. The hotel manager said, "I noticed you have Turkish plates on your car, do you come from Turkey?" I said, Yes we do." He said, "Is that your car? Has it ever been stolen?" I said, "Why do you ask?" He said, "Well everybody knows Turks are thieves." I assured him that that was not the case, but on the very basic level Greek perceptions of the Turks were not exactly charitable. On the other hand, I found it remarkably open and free from anti-Turkish hostility. I would dare say that some of our colleagues in the embassy in Athens, who had either served in Turkey or on the Turkish desk in Washington, were dealt with a lot less charitably than we were in Ankara. I remember one colleague saying that even the ambassador to Greece at that time, Monty Stearns, wouldn't allow him to attend staff meetings. He was a Turkish language officer as well as a Greek language officer, said he was regarded a Turkish "spy".

Q: It really passes understanding. In my experience in Athens was that you couldn't overestimate the reactions of the normal Greeks to anything where they thought that the Turks were doing something to them.

LA PORTA: Absolutely.

Q: I've heard it's not quite the other way around. The Turks have got other problems in a way.

LA PORTA: I think that's exactly right. The other problems of the Turks, and certainly as time has gone on, concern the rise of Islamic fundamentalists and the big influx of ethnic Kurds. There are also a lot of concerns over education, the secular nature of government, encroaching ethnicity and so forth. The Turks have at least 50% had their mind on a lot of other issues than just simply going toe-to-toe with the Greeks. Probably in the Greek mind it was 80% preoccupation with going toe-to-toe with the Turks.

I visited Cyprus with my family. I was able to get a pass to go across the Green Line to visit our embassy in Nicosia. I was interested from the POL/MIL standpoint just in terms of what the Turks really did have in Northern Cyprus and it was far from a grizzling military camp. There were mostly under trained territorial soldiers with second class weapons. These were not the crack troops the Turks had out on the Eastern border. They certainly had no greater level of armament other than they would probably need for defending themselves. There were no panzer divisions pointed at Greek Cyprus, although certainly they did have the air power on their side and had they wanted to do something by sea they had a capability of doing it. But Turkish Cyprus was by no means an armed camp. In fact it was remarkably open although because the small population, most of the towns and even the resorts along the coast were vastly underpopulated. You didn't see too many people on the streets. The smaller restaurants had people in them, but they were by no means crowded. By the middle of 1977, there was no significant tourist traffic.

On the other hand, we were able to appreciate some of the true Christian and Muslim historical treasures there. The mosaics, the churches, and the monasteries. The Turks were, with a few exceptions, very scrupulous in keeping the Christian sites in good shape. There's a lot of archeology that's gone in Cyprus, both Turkish Cyprus and Greek Cyprus, by foreigners. There's been I think a good record of not only protecting what is there in terms of cultural and archeological significance, but a lot of that has expanded in terms of new research.

Q: Well, tell me what was your reading on how from your NATO colleagues about how the Turkish military fit into NATO at that time.

LA PORTA: The Turkish armed forces then and now I think have had the well deserved reputation for being one of the best trained if not well equipped forces around. Then as now, we look at the Turkish soldier as being well motivated, underpaid, but having skill and trainability. The Turkish armed forces historically, even from Ataturk's time, were probably far too large in proportion to the national need. That said, they were valued in the NATO context for being able to surge divisions against the hypothetical Soviet threat. We're always eager for them to play a role in NATO exercises. Capabilities-wise it was evident at that time that the Turkish armed forces were desperately in need of military modernization and equipment. Beginning in the late '70s a number of co-production agreements emerged with NATO and with individual weapons manufacturers, many of them aided and abetted by the United States to establish production facilities in Turkey, to produce ammunition of NATO standard and to produce light weapons. NATO also changed its personal weapons standards at that time, so the Turks now produce extremely good equipment.

They also needed a big overhaul of their communications and command and control systems. This was a fairly large NATO and U.S. concern during that period. We had the NATO headquarters in Izmir; the remnant of that headquarters is still there. In fact under the Transformation plans of both the United States and NATO, the allied air force command is being restored to Izmir, so it's deja vu all over again.

In Turkey there are two NATO air command elements, air commands. There is an air traffic control center and then there's the NATO forward command presence for aerial defense. In the mid '70s there were nodules of American forces stationed all over the country. We hadn't even drawn down completely our army elements, for example, that were responsible for operating the missile facilities. They were being closed out but fairly slowly. We also had the infamous "listening posts" along the Black Sea run by the National Security Agency. We had Detachment 120, the headquarters of the National Security Agency operation in Ankara. We had the big U.S. air bases at Incirlik and Erzurum still in operation at that point. It was a very dominant, evident and obvious presence there. In contrast, the Turks focused on "garden variety" missions where you needed large numbers of troops to secure a territory, to establish law and order, or to conduct pacification operations. Where the Turks are less capable is in special operations. There is an insufficiency of light reconnaissance units. They're not a light army. They move very heavily. Today Turkey has committed one army division to NATO's Rapid Reaction Force. I think the big question is how to move the division because it is a large force and it is not very well equipped to move, lacking a lot of the transportable infrastructure.

Q: What about...did you get any feel for the workings within NATO headquarters in Brussels about your POLAD counterparts, how the Turks were operating then?

LA PORTA: We did. I think first of all it was a matter of almost daily engagement with the foreign ministry and to a lesser extent the Turkish general staff on NATO issues. They were very active. My opinion at the time was that they had probably the best single group of diplomats of any country in Brussels. They worked a very tight regime between Brussels and Ankara and the people doing NATO affairs and political affairs on the upper levels in the foreign ministry were absolutely first rate. These were first class people, extremely well trained, well educated, superb linguists, didn't miss a thing and it was very clear that the Turks invested in the NATO relationship almost like no other country did in terms of the number and the quality of the people they had doing it. We had a very good, though not necessarily easy, working relationship with the Turks. We prosecuted the alliance issues, whatever they were, very actively with the foreign ministry.

Q: The Greek attempted coup in Cyprus took place in July I think 14th, 1974.

LA PORTA: Right.

Q: So, you were not that much farther away and responding in a completely bipartisan way when the Greek lobby in congress really did a number on the Turks. How stood the situation on that issue at that time?

LA PORTA: Well, the embargo on Turkey was still in force to a great extent except for those things that we could justify in terms of alliance requirements. So, we had some latitude there and there were some loopholes. There was no question whenever sanctions are applied, whether it's Turkey or virtually any other country, there is bound to be enormous political grief. We spent a lot of time, and certainly the ambassador did, in terms of explaining why these sanctions were imposed. We worked very hard with Turkish organizations and people here in the United States to try to get some understanding of the situation both in the administration and on the Hill. There was also, I think, a profound inclination of the Carter administration not to do very much about the relationship with Turkey. And it was a constant matter of top-level concern, as Ambassadors are probably more important than they are today of pushing the Hill to get changes. Both Macomber and Spiers were energetic, but probably Spiers was more skillful in prosecuting Turkey's case with the Congress.

Q: When you're trying to explain is really two explanations. One's the real explanation and the other is how politically important the Greek votes are in the United States. The Greek community in the United States is well organized and there ain't no Turkish organization in the United States and that's the real reason. I assume we had another reason, I'm not quite sure.

LA PORTA: Armenian genocide.

Q: Oh, yes, Armenian genocide.

LA PORTA: There were several layers to the problem as there always are. One of them was to prevent damage being done in the programs of the World Bank and the IMF and what Turkey was having to address in terms of financial adjustments (and not very successfully doing that). At the same time, we did have a couple of organizations that were maybe not significant as they are today, but by the late '80s the American Turkish Association and a few other organizations began to be quite powerful. A subsequent U.S. ambassador, Strausz-Hupe, a political appointee, used those organizations quite successfully in kind of mobilizing them to press the case in Washington at the political level. The thing that has always saved Turkey was the importance of Turkey vis-ï¿½-vis the NATO interests in containing the Soviet Union and generally containing other influences from the South and East. That bunch of bad actors was very important. We also had Israel and Palestine in the '70s, our concern over the Suez Canal, upheavals in Egypt, and other things in that area. Turkey, we considered, was always a nice "air craft carrier." If you look at Turkey, its footprint is like a large extremity extending itself into the heart of the Middle East. Thus it was a solid platform for not only the United States, but Western interests in general. Even then, though, a lot of the suspicions and anti-Turkish sentiment in the EU and from liberal elements in Europe was beginning to come out.

Q: Was there an anti-Muslim strain to that do you think?

LA PORTA: Absolutely. It is racial. It is religious. Depending upon the country, I think there is very little tolerance of that kind of diversity. For example, the French are simply viscerally anti-Muslim, anti-Turkish. It's just something that they simply don't want to deal with.

Q: Did you sense this is in the NATO context? France was not, sort of in NATO, but not in NATO. I mean, were you picking up these strains as you worked with the NATO relationship?

LA PORTA: I think they were certainly underlying, but they certainly weren't things that were being acted out over the table, unlike the current situation where they are now. Even at that point the EEC was making demands on Turkey in terms of human rights behavior, the role of its armed forces and so forth. In the intervening period all of that has really snowballed.

Q: What about relations of those two other almost hostile powers. The American Embassy in Athens and the American Embassy in Nicosia. Did you pick up, I mean, were we all on a team or not?

LA PORTA: We were certainly not. There was no question that the American Embassy in Nicosia was just seen as the tool of the Greeks and we assessed its importance accordingly. In other words you knew that their behavior would be predictable. The embassy in Athens was a little bit more complex. As I indicated earlier there was very strong clientitis in Athens. We had a couple of ambassadors and members of the country team who certainly I thought were excessive in their partisanship for the Greek side, right or wrong or indifferent. One of my friends at that time was serving in Thessaloniki when the consul general was John Negroponte. John Negroponte's ancestors came from Corfu. I daresay he's probably the only American diplomat of Corfu origin ever. John was in Greek language training while I was in Turkish language training and we got to know each other quite well. On one of our trips we visited him in Thessaloniki. I think John had a bit different view than his own embassy in Athens because he was halfway to Turkey. From Thessaloniki you looked at the complexities of the region, relations with Turkey and others with more of a dispassionate eye.

Q: How stood the relationship with Syria and Israel in those days?

LA PORTA: Syria always has been a complicating factor, usually negative, for Turkey having been an Ottoman dependency. There weren't any Syrians who had any love for any Turk. On the other hand the Turks had several significant interests that were vis-ï¿½-vis Syria. One was to keep the door open on the oil pipeline that ran through Syria near to the Turkish border. Although it was a narrow gauge pipeline it was nevertheless very important for petroleum supply in Southern and Eastern Turkey. The second thing the Turks wanted to have what they considered orderly commercial relations with Syria. Syria was not important in the modern economic sense, but it was important for cross-border trading and the markets in Aleppo supplied a lot of goods into Southern and Eastern Turkey. Indeed the U.S. military had a port handling unit down very close to the Turkish border. Basically they'd expedite goods coming North into Incirlik air base by truck. The third Turkish interest was to keep Syria as politically friendly as possible because they did not want a hostile or extremist regime on their borders. But let me make it clear they had no love for the Baathist regime of Assad Hussein at all.

Q: This was Assad and...?

LA PORTA: Assad and his military gang. Relations on the top government level were very chilly. There were no Turks going to Damascus to kiss Assad on the cheek and no big Syrians came into Turkey to kiss any Turk on the cheek. That was out of bounds. The old colonial relationships didn't allow for that. The Turks had a very pragmatic outlook toward Syria pretty much as they do today. In other words, they don't like Syria. They have to deal with them. They need Syria for certain economic purposes; they don't want to pick fights for stability reasons. We were aware that Turkish intelligence in the Turkish general staff were talking to the Mossad.

Q: The Israeli Secret Service?

LA PORTA: The Israeli Secret Service and I will have to say that officially everybody says uh huh, okay, that's nice, but as long as it doesn't get out of hand or result in disruptions either to our relationship with Israel or doesn't result in kind of inflaming Turkish relations with the Arab world, keep it at kind of a manageable level. I do not know, nor do I have any reason to suspect, that the United States or any of our agencies aided or abetted that relationship. It was known in certain circles at that time and it was something that nobody objected to and everybody hoped would be kept in a manageable proportion. In the mid '80s the Turks signed a defense agreement with Israel and the relationship has grown. They now conduct bilateral exercises together.

Q: How about the Iran-Iraq relationship at your time?

LA PORTA: Probably Iraq was more easily disposed of in Turkish views by being ignored. Again it's one of these Baghdad-Istanbul problems; no Iraqi had any use for any Turk and vice versa. Baghdad is the caliphate that challenged Istanbul; the Ottoman supremacy was not well regarded in Iraq or Iran. More important was Iran because Iran and Turkey were joined in CENTO, the Central Treaty Organization.

Q: I had thought that had demised after 1956.

LA PORTA: No. CENTO was alive. It did not demise until the end of the Shah's reign.

Q: 1958 I mean.

LA PORTA: The Shah's reign, the Shah was overthrown. We had a ministerial meeting of CENTO in Tehran in the spring of 1978. I went because CENTO was part of my little pol-mil bag, so I backstopped the ambassador and U.S. delegation. I was the Turkish expert in the party. On the official level, Turkish-Iranian relations were very correct although the underlying sentiment was of Persian-Ottoman competition. Like the relationship with Baghdad, and the relationship with Egypt, was very largely conditioned by the events and history of the Ottoman Empire. The Persians of course always paraded themselves as saying they were never subjected to Ottoman domination. Well, that's only partly true. It depended on which dynasty you were talking about and which piece of territory you were talking about. There was an ebb and flow in Ottoman control over parts of Iran and it depended largely on who was up and who was down on the Persian side. The Turks generally regarded the Shah of Iran as kind of an upstart, a big ego, and they snickered and questioned his legitimacy as Shah which, after all, was probably a fair question.

Q: He only went back one generation. His father was a Cossack essentially.

LA PORTA: The interesting part of it of course is that a lot of the most brilliant art in Istanbul in the Topkapi Museum for example is Persian, it's not Turkic or Ottoman in the later period.

Q: Did you get any feel for how the Turkish military judged the Iranian military?

LA PORTA: On the military-to-military level things were not bad because I think that they all behaved quite respectfully in the terms of a context of an alliance relationship. Iran had a friendly relationship with NATO as a non-NATO member, but friendly NATO state. That's the same way in which they were regarded in Washington; of course we had very large assistance programs. A lot of that assistance came through or from U.S. forces in Turkey. There were lively goings-on back and forth, and the Turks and the Iranians played reasonably well in CENTO. Now CENTO didn't ever involve a lot of ground forces or combined military operations. What CENTO did reasonably well were air control, air surveillance and air patrolling. Watching the borders with the Soviet Union, over flying Iraq and other places that you wanted to keep an eye on, the Turkish-Iranian relationship during the Shah's time worked reasonably well. The CENTO secretariat was resident in Ankara at that time. The military head of CENTO was a U.S. Air Force general and the other CENTO nations seconded officers to that secretariat and usually one diplomat. It was a mini-alliance working in downtown Ankara, part of my job in the embassy was to be the CENTO liaison officer.

Q: While you were there what about the Kurdish problem?

LA PORTA: Kurds were becoming a problem, but then as now Kurdish migration was set in the larger context of either political-religious activism or extreme leftist terrorism. The conservatively religious Kurds were always fair game for recruitment into the National Salvation Party with its thuggish youth wing. You also had the extreme left and labor unions that were predominant in Istanbul, but recruited Kurdish activists who joined with underground Turkish Kurdish nationalists, incorporating them into terrorist activities against the government. Even today this low-level violence is perpetrated by the Turkish extreme left with a lot of Kurdish activism and participation.

We had serious security problems not only in Ankara but in other places. In an incident involving an American military school bus, our kids were ambushed and shot at. Thank goodness nobody was killed. We had incidents against our smaller bases around Istanbul as well as against our consulate there. There were also intermittent anti-U.S. demonstrations against our embassy in Ankara. It was basically low level activity but very troubling. We gave our families protective training to hit the deck if they heard a loud noise and to look out for suspicious packages. This was in the mid '70s. As I recounted to you earlier I came fairly fresh from the seizure of our embassy in Kuala Lumpur, so on a personal level we were very much sensitized to dangers like this.

Q: What about the students, the university students? Were they a factor at all?

LA PORTA: Mostly no, but some yes. The mainline universities were pretty well controlled. The Turkish Secret Service and police had infiltrated virtually any student organization in the major state universities, and by and large the student populations were fairly docile. They became very active later in protesting the military takeover by General Kenan Evren in 1980.

Q: That was after you'd left?

LA PORTA: After we had left. The students were mobilized against that military takeover. We had friends in the universities and we still have friends teaching in a couple of the larger universities in Ankara. By and large the student population was pretty inert; there was generally not a great or unanimous inclination toward activism. Where it was difficult was in some of the polytechnics and Islamic schools. These were what I would call the outriders of the state education system. The populations in those schools were less middle class and more working class, more susceptible to infiltration by extreme leftists or extreme rightists, and less sophisticated in their political viewpoints. That's where the extreme organizations of the right and the left found their great gain. So you had the fascists recruiting in these polytechnics and trade schools and so forth.

Q: By the time you left Turkey, what did you see or was this a country that was coming along or had almost possible problems or you know, I mean, entering the world?

LA PORTA: Well, it was certainly looking that way. I jokingly measured the situation by whether we were having more positive days or more negative days. We used to joke among ourselves, well, is this a positive day or is this a negative day? By the time that we left in late summer of 1978 that we were certainly having more negative days than we were having positive ones for a number of reasons. First of all the economy was deteriorating badly. There were shortages of petrol, shortages of cooking gas. We in the embassy had to go and stand on long queues in order to get gasoline. My wife had to line up to get bottles of cooking gas. The embassy didn't provide those things. The military provided it for their folks, but not to us. We also saw a rising number of incidents of low-level violence such as threats against people in the embassy. Our PAO (Public Affairs Officer) was threatened by name at that time. If I remember correctly there were threats against the ambassador. There was vastly increased security at our logistical support base run by the air force in Ankara. We had a bombing at a little branch PX, a little convenience store located at the military transient apartments not far from our apartment.

Ankara was a not bad place to live except for the smog caused by burning soft brown coal for heating in the winter. There were all conveniences, shopping, good restaurants, the opera, symphony, etc. But the main problem was environmental. The big downside of serving in the embassy, however, was the low level of logistical support especially as compared to the military. Our housing allowances were too low and we were out of pocket several hundred dollars a month for rent alone, not to mention utilities and other living expenses. State was very niggardly with allowances and benefits for those of us in Ankara.

There was a great deal of unsettlement in Turkey at the time and it was not a situation where we felt we wanted to stay. I personally I was asked to stay. It was very late in the assignment game and Ambassador Ron Spiers asked me to replace a colleague in the political section. My colleague in the political section wasn't sure whether he wanted to stay another year or not and I said, look, if you can't make up your mind, I'm out of here. My wife and I decided at that point that, with two small children, the low level of our embassy services and going out of pocket on housing were not worth it. We saw the economy going down, we said, well, do we really want to continue on?

In the upshot what happened is that, as often happens in our business, I got a phone call in the middle of the night from a colleague in Washington in the East Asia bureau who asked would I like to break my assignment to Australia. I was destined to go to Canberra as political military officer and would I consider breaking my assignment to Canberra and going to Medan in Sumatra as principal officer. We had one question and we said, what is the school situation, but we said, yes, we will go to Sumatra. It was no contest.

The point remains, and I guess in a summary fashion, I will have to say that both my wife and I valued all of our time in Turkey. We certainly had wonderful Turkish relationships and a good professional working environment. As I indicated earlier, they were some of the best people in the world. We had excellent relationships and I certainly had high regard for everything we and the Turks were trying to do together. Tough people, hard negotiators, but that's fair.

I always used to say, there wasn't a Turk that we didn't like except for our landlord. That's probably true. We were always treated well. We traveled widely in Turkey on a personal basis. We'd just get in our car and go. As I mentioned earlier we went to Greece and we were always well treated. You could see the country going downhill; a year from the time we left there were severe shortages of coal to the point that during the winter of '79 and '80, apartment houses didn't have any coal to put in their boilers to heat their apartments. There was no cooking gas that you could buy, no gasoline either. It was scarce when we were there, but over a year later there was none available. Severe shortages of basic commodities and the commercial economy started to stop functioning. Severe dislocations in the transportation system, stoppages of trains and other consequences largely due to the failure of the Turkish economy to modernize and also, inflated budgets, government rip offs by state corporations, parastatals supporting uneconomic systems, a profligate banking system and all the things that the IMF loves to hate. All of those ills were accumulating.

On the other hand, we do retain enormous regard for our Turkish relationships. We were fortunate to be able to go back to Turkey a couple of times in my last job in NATO. Today the Turks deserve an awful lot of respect for the way they're trying to fashion their own democracy in dealing with problems of religious extremism and migration, the Kurdish problem, the lack of assimilation and other issues.

Q: I wonder if you'd mention your personal experiences with the temper of William Macomber, ambassador. I have some stories and I was wondering whether you have some.

LA PORTA: I guess they can be summed up in a couple of ways. Number one, of course, he was a person that was so mercurial, whenever anybody was called into the office they would come out quaking totally from the first class reaming out or the second class reaming out. How bad was that thing? I will have to say that his DCM during the initial part of my time there Don Bergus didn't help terribly much in being a cushion between Macomber and everybody else. Macomber was an equal opportunity abuser. On the professional level he was he could have his good moments. He was very funny and I remember one time we were having a difficult NATO issue. I was the action officer and we had to go early in the evening to see the foreign minister who was a wonderful man. Caglayangil was his name and Macomber used to call him Charlie. He'd come into the room and say, "Hey, Charlie how are you?" Poor old Caglayangil didn't have a clue as to what Macomber was talking about.

We were in the car driving to the foreign ministry sitting beside him. I had a modest size pad, not a big steno pad. I hated to have large pads of paper when I'm in a meeting. He said, "You have paper there? Do you have a spare pen so you can take notes?" I assured him that I was well equipped for the meeting that he was going to have. I'd been through this innumerable times, but he again went through his drill on how he wanted the note taking to proceed. Then we got to the meeting and after it was concluded, we were in the car going back to the embassy and he said, "You're going to write the message. We'll give this to Washington tonight and we'll get it out, but I noticed you weren't taking very many notes." I said, "I can assure you, Mr. Ambassador, I can faithfully record everything that transpired." He said, "But how can you do that? You didn't take very many notes." Being blessed with pretty good recall, I'd take enough notes, everybody takes notes in their own way, but he just wouldn't let it go.

Macomber liked dogs more than he did children and he used to collect all the stray dogs and he had them living with him. They were either in the embassy compound or at the residence. He had three legged dogs and two legged dogs, all kinds of strays. Because they knew he was a sucker for animals, people would drop off stray animals at the gate and say give this to the ambassador. On the other hand he and his wife Phyllis were very generous in personal ways. He did things that are classically good. For example, he made sure that junior officers, secretaries and admin people were invited to the residence. He always had places at the dinner table for other people other than the top ranks. Phyllis was charming. She was lovely and, having been a former Foreign Service Secretary herself, she knew how to treat people. They invited people with children to bring their kids to the house to play, usually on the afternoons and on weekends when they weren't having functions because they knew that there weren't many playgrounds in Ankara. A lot of people who were in apartments didn't have safe places for the kids to run, ride bikes or play in a sandbox. We were over there a lot. We could walk to his residence from our apartment.

He was also very generous, very democratic, in the small "d" sense in allowing people to use the embassy apartment in Istanbul. A beautiful apartment overlooking the Bosporus, not lavish, but, what a view, and with a veranda that was absolutely superb. Many times my wife and I took the kids and we got on the night train, went down to Istanbul, spend a long weekend, stayed in the apartment and then come back to Ankara. The Macombers were very generous in that way. It was just his work habits. No one could leave the embassy until he did. I mean because he would always be looking for the political section or my section or the Econ section, so you were always stuck. The other negative is, having been a former Undersecretary for Management, he didn't give a fig for the management of the embassy. It was amazing. So much for diplomacy of the '80s.

Q: Then you went to Medan and you were there from when to when?

LA PORTA: We were in Medan from 1978 to 1981.

Q: This is the 2nd of June, 2004. At the end of the last session you went to Medan, all of a sudden I thought that you were at one of those posts on the coast of Mexico, but that's not right.

LA PORTA: Almost, but the way the Medan assignment came about is kind of interesting because I had a friend who was back here on the Indonesia desk. He was deputy director and there was a situation that developed in Indonesia where somebody departed Jakarta early, then the consul in Medan, Harriett Isom was sent down to Jakarta. My friend Dan Sullivan called me up kind of in the middle of the night. Dan said, "Well, Al, you really don't want to go to Australia do you?" I had orders to go from Ankara to Canberra where I was supposed to be a political military officer and he said, "Well, wouldn't you rather be principal officer in Medan because Harriett is going to Jakarta?" I said, instantly I said, "Absolutely, let's do it." My wife had one question, is there a school for the kids, because both of our children were getting close to school age. Dan came back and said, yes, indeed there is an international school and that's how that assignment came about.

Q: Then what was Medan, what was the situation on Sumatra when you got there? This was in '79.

LA PORTA: It was late summer '78.

Q: Oh, '78.

LA PORTA: '78, yes. Medan was one of the mostly neglected cities outside Jakarta in the sense that in North Sumatra you had a strong indigenous Chinese population (maybe 20% in the city itself) and these Chinese were largely unassimilated. You also had a mixture of Malay, Acehnese and Batak some of whom were Christian, some of whom were Muslim. It was quite a melting pot in its own way.

Q: The Batak were what?

LA PORTA: The Batak are the indigenous people in North Sumatra. They settled around Lake Toba which is one of the world's second or third largest freshwater lakes. They were partially Christianized by the Lutherans in the 1880s and 1890s. Other Batak tribes closer to the coast were Islamicized by traders and itinerant preachers. The Batak are legendary for their war fighting prowess and they don't take kindly to people who are not friendly to them. It is very interesting culturally because they are about as unJavanese as you can be for being in the same country. In Medan in North Sumatra we had a wonderful window on Indonesia in the sense you had very strong Muslims and secessionists in Aceh to the North, you also had coastal Malays along the coast. The Eastern shore of Sumatra is mostly mangrove swamp and there's a very gentle plain, very wide rivers and interestingly lots of oil and gas there. In the interior it's heavily forested. Along about the '70s and into the '80s you had plantation agriculture really taking off. They had grown rubber in North Sumatra and Central Sumatra for oh, at least 70 or 80 years, but palm oil was just in its infancy. Under the Suharto government's transmigration program, which brought migrants from heavily populated Java to remote areas, plantation agriculture really took off.

The western coast of Sumatra was mountainous, rugged and notable mainly for the home of the Minangkabau people who are ethnically Malay, but a matrilineal society. Further South on the West coast of Sumatra you had the province of Bengkulu, or as it used to be called in the early 19th century Bencoulen. There were about a dozen years when Bengkulu was a colony of the British who swapped territory with the Dutch to retain rights to Singapore. During the time of Sir Stamford Raffles, the viceroy, the British built a rather imposing fort in Bengkulu. It's kind of an interesting place in a historical sense.

Southern Sumatra is largely lowlands, swamps, some areas that are suitable for rice culture. Off Southeast Sumatra you have the tin mining areas of Bangka, several islands and where there are still are the largest tin mines in the world. Our consular district included two other important areas. One was Kalimantan, the Indonesian provinces of West Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, East Kalimantan and Central Kalimantan, which formed two-thirds of the island of Borneo with Sarawak and Sabah being incorporated into Malaysia. In Kalimantan you had another odd mixture of populations, the Dayaks, or Ibans as they're known in Malaysia, who are forest dwelling people, live in long houses, have a very distinctive hunting and gathering tradition. Along the coast you had various populations of Madurese settlers from Madura off the Java coast. You also had Buginese from Sulawesi and you had ethnic Malays who streamed into most of the coastal areas. Kalimantan was important in two respects: the greatest output of forest products is from Kalimantan, and natural gas. Today Chevron and others have very well established gas fields there.

The other second big part of our consular district outside of Sumatra was the sea space between Kalimantan and Sumatra. It's like a big funnel, almost triangular in nature with Singapore sitting at the top and the Southern end of the Maluku Straits an the bottom. You had a large expanse of sea with the Natuna Islands in the far North, and to the Northeast you had the Spratly Islands. The Natuna Islands likewise were a locus for oil and natural gas development in the late '70s, continuing to today. There is also an industrial enclave at Batam Island which is basically a half an hour by air from Singapore. Batam is becoming a manufacturing center; goods are manufactured in Indonesia and sent out through Singapore. The other thing that Batam was famous for was the site for the refugee camps for the inflow from Cambodia and Vietnam. When the boat people took off they headed South. Usually if they were pushed off from the Malaysian coast, which many of them were, they found their way to Batam and some of the Indonesian islands. By the late '70s there was a significant refugee population on Galang Island, near Batam where the U.S. processing center was located, and you also had refugee camps in some other areas. All in all it was a very varied area. Lots of interest. Lots of things to do. Needed lots of time to travel to these areas. One of our big challenges was covering the consular district.

Q: I would think given what you've said about Sumatra that the attraction of Singapore would be a lot greater than of Jakarta.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. It was easier for us to go 45 minutes by air to Singapore or 40 minutes by air to Penang in Malaysia than it was for us to travel an hour and a half to Jakarta.

Q: But I also would think that the population, the business elites and all this, Singapore is a really big trading place. Indonesia was...

LA PORTA: It was a hinterland. It was a market, but it was also an entrepï¿½t for natural commodities.

Q: Was there undue political influence coming out of Singapore or not or was there an interest there?

LA PORTA: There were hangovers from the Konfrontasi during the Sukarno era and also some overtones of Singapore-Malaysian frictions. By the late '70s most of the concerns centered on smuggling and illegal migration, because of the attraction of the relatively more prosperous areas in Malaysia along the coast, especially the West Coast of the Malay Peninsula as well as Singapore. High economic growth rates in Malaysia, due to construction, natural resource and agricultural development, were a magnet for poor Indonesians who found their way across the straits in small boats. Even today you have a mini-immigration crisis going on between Indonesia and Malaysia. Malaysia always wanted to deport or exile Indonesians who found their way over and at various points in time they herded Indonesians into camps. That kind of thing is bound to cause frictions.

Other issues were by and large manageable except you still have today the lingering rivalries and suspicions among Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia that don't always make for a very happy family and certainly inhibit cooperation.

Q: Given that, how big was the consulate?

LA PORTA: We had six American officers. We had a consular officer, who also had other duties in the political realm. We had a political-econ officer. We had a PAO. We had an administrative officer. There was myself. Later we got a dedicated political officer.

Q: How heavy did the writ of our embassy in Jakarta rest on your post?

LA PORTA: Not very much. I think that the fact that I had known and served with both the ambassador and DCM helped.

Q: Who were?

LA PORTA: Ed Masters was the ambassador and Paul Gardner was the DCM. It certainly made it easier to have known them during my first tour in Jakarta. Harriett Isom, who had been a friend from other posts, was the political counselor. We had good working relationships with the embassy and we had a good base of understanding with USAID and with the public affairs people in USIS. We had a very energetic, brilliant branch PAO, Dr. Frank Jenista, who is now retired and is a professor in Ohio. He served several times in the Philippines. We had a very dynamic public affairs program. On the AID side we had a group of 15 to 25 contractors working on various projects including port development, a road project up toward the North Sumatra-Aceh border. We had a provincial area development program. We had Save the Children Foundation that was doing feeding and small village development work up in Aceh. And we had several other projects, such as a fisheries project that was a very good one.

My approach was to of draw all of these people into dialogue with the consulate, make friends with them and with USAID. We had a very good relationship. In fact, while I was there we sponsored two conferences of donors, including project people from the multilateral agencies as well as bilateral donors. We talked for a couple of days about problems of project administration, how to deal with the provincial governments in Sumatra, and exchanged experiences. It was a good exercise in what I would call development diplomacy.

Q: What were the relations first with sort of the American community there, the oil, the missionary?

LA PORTA: We had about 2,000 Americans in the immediate North Sumatra area including Aceh, especially Southern Aceh where Mobil Oil was heavily engaged in gas field development. They had their regional headquarters and logistical base in Medan. Their families populated the international school. They were extremely generous in the work that they did in the community and for the most part they had very healthy working relations with the Indonesian side. It was a little dicey in Aceh at that point in the late '70s because of the lingering Aceh separatist movement. There were small bandit-type groups, three to seven or eight people, operating in Mobil's concession area trying to promote the Acehnese independence movement with the objective of getting control of the Mobil Oil assets.

That insurgency continues today and indeed its grown larger, but by and large these are pretty much discredited people who simply want to make a land and resource grab for their own glorification in the name of establishing Acehnese self government and identity at the very tip of North Sumatra. Then as now the majority of the Acehnese are victims of this. They're not necessarily active supporters and the insurgency is confined, as it was then, to about six districts mostly in Southeastern and Eastern Aceh. Also, then as now, the Acehnese and Indonesians in general are not helped by a poor record of governance in Aceh. In Aceh, when there has been more honest and better government, there was usually a decline in separatist activity and popular support for the Free Aceh terrorists. On the other hand, over the long span of years, the record of governance in Aceh has not been very commendable and fueled the insurgency.

Q: How did you find, how about of the role of Jakarta to the government there? How did you find dealing with them?

LA PORTA: I found the rule of Jakarta was not very heavy handed, although the central government kept a grip on finances and the security mechanisms. One of Sukarno's great contributions was creation of the unitary state. Central power and administration was exercised in several ways. The central government ministries had their own offices established in each province. Those ran all of the government programhealth, education, transportation, etc. The interior ministry had its representatives, usually for citizenship affairs. Then each province had an appointed governor who had his own administration for local affairs. In fact the provincial governments were quite benign and not bad to deal with. There was also a regional military command under a three-star general for Sumatra and the sea space to the East and there were subordinate naval and air force commands. The central armed forces structure was perpetuated on the regional basis; then down to the provincial level. Army units are found right down into the village level where there is a security post in every settlement of any significant size.

By and large political activity was pretty calm during those years. In other words, there was no...not too much evidence of discontent with the Suharto administration. Politically, people were grouped into the parties dictated by the central government: a secularist party, a nationalist party and a religious party. There were government sanctioned labor and mass organizations, more benign than in Sukarno's time, as well as youth groups. There were large populations of students who were pretty calm, except when it came to certain causes. For example, when something bad happened in Palestine we knew that the students would be at the gates of the consulate. Likewise during the Iranian crisis in 1978-1979 a large body of the Muslim population in North Sumatra considered the U.S. to be anti-Islamic and they picked up on all of the Ayatollah rhetoric. Except for that kind of activism, there were few displays of political dissent and things were reasonably settled.

Q: Who cranked up these demonstrations?

LA PORTA: In Jakarta there reportedly were some official elements who would be behind the demonstrations. We knew there were certain activist mosques that could be triggered very rapidly to conduct a march on the embassy or to conduct a demonstration. In Medan, it was a little less automatic and a little more spontaneous. During the Iranian crisis period we made a lot of effort to reach out to professors at the Islamic University, the student organizations, and to the university administrations to keep lines of communication open. We also made sure that they were included in programs we sponsored. If we had speakers we could direct them out to those audiences and so forth.

In North Sumatra there were a number of different universities. There was the state university, the University of North Sumatra (USU). You had Nommensen University, which was a Protestant university named after the Lutheran pastor who was the first western missionary among the Bataks. Then there was a smallish Catholic University, as well as two large Islamic institutions: UISU, the Islamic University of North Sumatra, and the IAIN or State Islamic Studies Institute in North Sumatra. They were like the tertiary level Islamic universities found in all of the major areas of Indonesia. USIU was private but the IAIN was run by the government Ministry of Religious Affairs..

Q: At that time were we monitoring or aware of what was being taught in Islamic schools? Because, now at the turn of the century, this has become quite an issue all over because of the anti-Christian, anti-American studies that have been done. I was wondering whether those were issues at all at this time.

LA PORTA: Teaching in Islamic schools reflected a continuing radical strain in Islam that is traceable back to the early 1920's. At that time, several religious groups developed a fundamentalist body of teachings that advocated imposition of Sharia law and state organization instead of secularism. Part of this was directed against the Dutch colonial power, later it was directed against Sukarno's unitary secular state. In West Sumatra in the late 1950's and early 1960's, there were what was called the PRRI Permesta rebellion in which Islamic state advocates, known as Darul Islam, made an attempt to seize power and secede from the Indonesian state. They were crushed. Unfortunately the United States was caught trying to suborn and support some of the dissident elements and it was not a happy period.

The United States' role in messing around with Islamic extremists in Indonesia was one that was not an enviable record. There has always been a radical, if not violent, strain in the Islam in Indonesia. By and large this is not mainstream, but it is confined to generally remote, what we call pondok schools or pesantrens that are isolated, deprived, cater to the poorest elements in society. This is where Islamic extremism today is manifested as a result of al-Qaeda and its ilk.

In 1981 a small group from a mosque in South Sumatra hijacked a Garuda airlines plane, flew it to Bangkok and made demands. The plane sat on the runway and a lot of people were held hostage on that airliner. After about three days of standoff with the Thai police who would not attack the plane, the Thai invited the Indonesians to send up a SWAT team of army special forces to do that. They did. They killed all of the perpetrators. I do not recall whether other sympathizers rounded up in South Sumatra or other actions taken against that particular school and mosque in that area remote area of South Sumatra, but it was a good example of how small groups of people can get big ideas even unconnected with international conspiracies.

Q: Had the communist movement pretty well dried up?

LA PORTA: The communist movement had been basically smashed. In North Sumatra, there were about 3,000 political prisoners, a few hundred of whom were actually in detention, but the others were living in the community under supervised detention. Those ex-PKI cadres were all, over time, convicted by either a military court or civilian court; they were deprived of their civil liberties; they had special I.D. cards; and they were watched very carefully. They had to report regularly to the army authorities in their areas. The detainees were not a big issue in North Sumatra although some of the more prominent PKI people who were exiled to the outer islands did succeed in writing and publishing books, and otherwise were unrepentant. Today, and only recently in the last several months, have the ex-PKI detainees been fully "rehabilitated" and their civil liberties restored.

Q: What about the Chinese? You mentioned there's a big hunk of unassimilated Chinese.

LA PORTA: The Chinese community in Medan was fascinating because, unlike most Chinese communities in Java, the Chinese were pretty much unassimilated. Many of them did not speak Indonesian. Many of them just knew only Chinese and were literate only in Chinese. This lack of assimilation has pretty much died out, I might add, but the Chinese community in Medan then and now still arouses some suspicion for its Chineseness. Under Sukarno the writing and teaching of Chinese was prohibited, you could not have signboards in Chinese. You were allowed to have shrines, but nothing approaching public displays of religion. The lion dance done at holiday times was prohibited and you did not have Chinese schools except that students were allowed to study Chinese on a tutorial basis. This was a concession granted to a few of the larger Chinese communities in the country. The Chinese in Medan were largely Hokkien Chinese from the Southeast coast of China, some Fujianese and from also from Hainan Island. They were purely commercial. Some did gravitate into the professions and we had good friends who were Chinese doctors and lawyers. By and large the Chinese were the commercial class in Medan, as well as in Aceh and in the interior.

One of the unfortunate aspects is that when there were times of political or economic stress, it's the Chinese who bear the brunt of the complaints and violence perpetrated for political reasons. Sometimes a shop would be torched; sometimes there would be things written on the sides of a building; sometimes people would be threatened; or robberies would occur directed at the Chinese. These were always a source of great concern for the government that simply wanted to keep things tamped down.

Q: What were things like on I don't want to call it Borneo, but whatever.

LA PORTA: Kalimantan is the current name for Borneo.

Q: Kalimantan. Was that, did you have much to do with that or was that sort of the back of beyond?

LA PORTA: It was almost the back of beyond, because with such a small consulate staff it was difficult to be able to travel there regularly. I tried to visit all of the provinces in Kalimantan twice a year and that was a stretch because the airline connections were just difficult. My officers probably went to Kalimantan maybe once a year, less frequently than I did. We had this huge consular territory and the large embassy in Jakarta wasn't traveling. It would be hard to get them out of the capital.

Q: I'm surprised in a way that they didn't take over Kalimantan themselves.

LA PORTA: Well, how to divide up the consular districts more efficiently, had been a matter for discussion over many years, but I think that the embassy always, even when I was serving there in the '60s, felt it was "so busy" that it was very hard to travel other than to the Eastern Islands, which covered the Moluccas (Maluku) and the Celebes (Sulawesi) and Papua. Today the consulate in Surabaya has jurisdiction over the Celebes, but other areas are still covered from Jakarta. Part of the problem is where the airlines go; back in the '70s, for example, the airline frequency to most of the capitals in Borneo/Kalimantan was not very great. Sometimes a couple of times a week, so you'd have to go to, let's say, Samarinda and do your business and then wait for a couple of days in order to get a flight to someplace else. You couldn't go from let's say from Samarinda to Balikpapan except for maybe one day a week. The communications within these areas were not easy either. The mid to late '70s and the early '80s showed a tremendous revolution in electronic communications, television and airline communications in terms of growth. Everyday there were new airline routes being opened up. Smaller airlines were coming in and flying. There were new airports being built or other airports being redeveloped. It was significant that you could be sitting out on Natuna Island out in the South China Sea and get Indonesian television. I think that arrived, by recollection, in 1980 or 1981. Those were big steps.

Q: Oh, I'm sure. Well, did you get involved at all over the Spratly problem and Vietnamese and Chinese, they had a claim on that.

LA PORTA: Oh, yes. Well, this was a nervous thing and the Indonesians' general inclination was to stay as far away as they could from the dispute and not take sides. They didn't want to anger China, but on the other hand they didn't want to anger their ASEAN colleagues either. They were afraid that these territorial claims would extend to the Natuna Island chain as it did in various ways in various times. There were areas where you had conflicting or overlapping claims between Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia and occasionally over small islands belonging to Singapore and Malaysia in the Southern reaches of the Strait of Malacca.

Q: Did you get involved and was piracy a problem, the Malacca Straits and all that now is a hotbed of small, well maybe even wide scale pirates.

LA PORTA: Small scale piracy is endemic to the area and its mainly borne of human and goods smuggling, whether from Southern Thailand to Singapore or across the Strait between Singapore and Sumatra or from Malaysia to Northern Sumatra. I'll be an iconoclast on this issue and I'll say that the bogeyman of piracy has been magnified to a proportion to equate that with terrorism. I don't think that that's justified. Piracy as an excuse for military action as now being proposed by some is not. It's an excuse; it's not a real problem. There are self defense measures that ships in the Malacca Strait can avail themselves of. There are other protections such as sea patrolling and other measures that can be taken. Yes, all of this could be more effective, but don't forget it's usually officials on both sides on the Strait of Malacca that have a vested interest in the illegal trade and it's the illegal trade that generally results in piracy.

Q: All right, you get down to what were some of the main activities and concerns at your post? This was '80?

LA PORTA: '78 to '81. Right. I think that we had a concern with, for lack of a better term, the political stability, political health, political evolution of Sumatra, Kalimantan and relations with the center. That was certainly our focus from Medan. The Aceh situation, both political and economic, was I think the immediate concern with the low level insurgency and the dissident movement there. Relations with Mobil Oil were, of course, of paramount concern.

Q: On that, was it sort of let Mobil take care of it, I mean, working out its own relations?

LA PORTA: Not at all. I think we and the embassy considered that we, the U.S. government, had a great role in doing what we could to facilitate not only security arrangements for Mobil Oil, but also anything in terms of furthering community development projects in that region. We had a couple of NGOs who were involved in village development in the area around Lhok Seumaw and the other areas where Mobil Oil had its operations. We worked actively with the company management to get NGOs involved. We had the rural road project in Central Aceh, so there was more of an interrelationship than just simply leaving it to the company. The company let us know when there were problems developing, whether with the locals, with dissident elements, or with Pertamina, the state oil company.

Q: Lately, some of the same challenges that happened in parts of Nigeria and other places where small villages near the oil fields feel that they're not getting enough benefit by these big oil companies. Everybody else is getting something from them. Did you have that problem?

LA PORTA: During my time and subsequently Mobil Oil was extremely generous in local community terms. Basically anything that was useful to do they did, and the resources involved were not great. Allowing for the fact that 80% of every nickel Mobil Oil made went back to the Indonesian government. So, very often the issue was inadequate resource transfers from Pertamina and the central government back to the localities for development purposes or other kinds of programs.

Q: Were you running across the problem of the Suharto family and others of corruption and keeping out resources that could be used for developing and ending up in their Swiss bank accounts?

LA PORTA: It began to be a problem in the early '80s. There was a joke going around that Madame Suharto was known as "Madame 10%" which was a play on her name because her first name was Tien and so everybody would kind of snicker and say, well, Madame Tien had to have her 10%. Unfortunately by the late '80s it became Madame 15%, 20% and a whole lot more for the kids. Institutionalization of the culture of malfeasance, corruption and payoffs occurred. At one point in Sumatra we did a lot of reporting on the "C" word as I call it, the corruption word. We had good relations with the AID and multilateral project people, for example, the Belawan port project outside of Medan funded by the ADB.

Q: ADB?

LA PORTA: Asian Development Bank. My good friend who was the manager of the project, and it was a very large one, said that basically about 12% of the total value of his operation was being siphoned off by either local officials or in other kickbacks to people in the bureaucracy. That was even back in 1979-80. Yes, corruption was a significant and growing problem. One cause is that the overall standard of living was still so low. You knew you would never get another letter delivered to your house unless you tipped the mailman who came around on his bicycle 100 rupiahs, or about 20 cents, for delivering the mail. Those kind of gratuities were extended just to keep things going as distinct from the grand rip-offs.

Beyond kind political stability, race relations and then Aceh, was the whole subject of human rights. This had emerged as a strong strain under the Carter administration. The system of human rights reports began about that time and we had this was the one area in which the embassy did have sensitivities about what was said and reported. We could send cables to Washington and worldwide ourselves without having to go through Jakarta or get a prior clearance unless it was a joint reporting project with somebody in Jakarta. But in the human rights area the ambassador and the DCM had sensitivities about what was being said because of the "volatile nature" of the situation back here in Washington. You never knew who your reporting was going to or who would seize on what particular issue. Human rights in Indonesia was most sensitive in the Congress after their take-over of East Timor in 1974.

Q: Washington basically, State Department on things of this nature leaves quite a bit to Congress and all that. It's endemic.

LA PORTA: It was then and it is now.

Q: Yes.

LA PORTA: Associated somewhat with the human rights were humanitarian issues concerning the refugees. When we got a dedicated political officer he spent a great deal of his time on refugee issues, visiting the refugee camps, dealing with the refugee bureau in State, regional conferences, going to Malaysia and doing other things in Singapore, etc.

Q: What were we doing with the refugees?

LA PORTA: We were basically trying to manage the refugee flow and we were trying to contain the problem. Upwards of 15-20,000 refugees reached Indonesia and most were eventually located on Galang Island near Batam off Singapore. Our government's posture was to urge the Indonesians to do the right thing and to treat the refugees humanely, to accept programs for refugee resettlement, refugee training and indoctrination prior to their resettlement in the U.S. or elsewhere. Programs were also operated through the UNHCR and others. There were far more issues with the Malaysians because of the push-offs and some of the violence directed at refugees. The Indonesians handled the refugee problem pretty well. I visited the refugee camps myself and I daresay conditions there were far better than refugee camps that the Malaysians had on these little crops of rock off the East coast of Malaya.

Q: Were we taking the refugees or processing them?

LA PORTA: We were processing them and taking them. The refugee processing in terms of the paper work was centralized in Singapore and that's where we had INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) people to do that as well as that's where the UNHCR people were. Fortunately we didn't have much to do in the consular sense with the documentation of refugees. The political officer that we had in the consulate did serve as an interface with the Indonesian officials and on a regional basis with our people.

Q: You talk about human rights. What were the human rights problems where you were?

LA PORTA: Well, there was a layer of them. There were some human rights related issues related to the dissidents in Aceh, the government cracking down on the wrong groups, the wrong people or at various times kind of going after one or another suspect student group. I think that the human rights in the positive sense involved the development of the legal aid institutes in Medan. These were kind of the first grassroots human rights NGOs to be set up in Indonesia. The Medan Legal Aid Institute (LBH) was led by a very fine elderly lady, an activist woman lawyer, Ani Abbas Manopo was her name. We knew her quite well. My wife was a lawyer, worked with her on a number of projects, and my wife did some teaching at the University of North Sumatra law school. She also put together programs on American law for seminars, meetings and conferences. On the human rights side our issue was not only reporting on dissidents and how people were treated, but also to encourage the development of these human rights institutes.

Q: You mentioned Lembaga Hukum Indonesia, that means LDH? Which stands for what?

LA PORTA: Indonesian Law Institute.

Q: Was Indonesian law common law or Napoleonic code?

LA PORTA: Dutch.

Q: Dutch. Dutch law being?

LA PORTA: The colonial law had not evolved very much. This is one of the big issues in that the Indonesians and the court system applied archaic laws from the Dutch colonial period to a whole host of issues for which they were unsuited. Even today you have controversies that develop when the courts choose to apply Dutch law rather than newer laws, for example, concerning press freedoms or human rights standards. This is still a big issue in terms of legal reform and Indonesia today is still a long way from adequacy.

Q: Did you feel that where you were that government was being fairly well projected into these places?

LA PORTA: I certainly had the feeling of optimism on most days. I think I've said before that you woke up in the morning and say, well, do you have an optimistic feeling today or negative feeling today; as long as your optimistic days outnumbered your negative ones things were in pretty good shape, you had pretty good morale and carried on. During that period in the late '70s and through the mid '80s you had a very strong sense of what Suharto had set out to do was really occurring. His stated goals were to concentrate on grassroots development as a way of improving what he called "national resilience" that contributed to the country's overall development.

In Sumatra and to some extent in Kalimantan, every week people could see new schools being built where there was no school before, a new health center where there was none before, a new airport opening up, a new airline was flying in, telephones becoming more commonplace and expanding television to the outermost areas. All of this was happening in real time. I very much felt that here is the march of progress. The governments' investments were paying off. Yes, there were some very conservative attitudes toward political freedom and not a lot of freedom of the press, but generally the government was not behaving in a brutish and repressive way towards its population. As long as things were getting better on the economic and social side, I think there were good arguments that could be made for Suharto's rule during this period.

Q: You've been there before, did you have a feeling Indonesia was knitting together as a country? Were there any sort of movements outside of Aceh which is such a small area that might break way or something?

LA PORTA: By and large there were always local issues and the government didn't have much tolerance for local languages and ethnic rights. During Suharto's time, and to some extent under Sukarno, they wanted to homogenize everything and saw assimilation as being the path to nationhood. I think it was certainly valid up to a certain point. As long as the government was a benign presence and the people in the government in the various instrumentalities of power did not behave in unreasonable ways or were moderate, I thought there certainly was a chance for the country to, as you put it, knit together and to really develop as a unitary state. On the other hand I think that the strains began to develop by the late '80s and early '90s when the autocratic system became rapacious in the economic sense and when there were no limits in terms of what Suharto, his cronies and his family wanted to achieve. That's when the government began to get into trouble over grandiose projects and big rip-offs.

In the late '80s and early '90s, the Suharto system began to push to extremes in terms of furthering the interests of the first family, cracking down on any dissent, and the repressive political measures began really to bite. It's a pity that the Suharto revolution lost its proper perspective during that period. At the time of our assignment in Sumatra in the late '70s there were certainly enough positive signs to outweigh the negative signs.

Q: I mean I realize it was way away from your orbit, but was East Timor, did it come up as an issue, was that something that was talked about where you were?

LA PORTA: Yes it was. Indeed, it was a matter of great U.S. government concern. The imbroglio over the repression of East Timor in 1974 and '75 and the continuing presence of the Indonesians were certainly of great concern. On the other hand, it was far away from us in Sumatra and did not intrude on us as much as it did in Jakarta. But we got the full brunt of that when I returned to Washington after Medan and after a year at the War College, when I took up my job as deputy director in the office of Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma and Singapore affairs.

Q: One of the people I've been interviewing is Dick Livingston as a consular officer in Indonesia. What about consular things? I know in Jakarta they had a number of consular problems of Americans disappearing or going off on hikes or getting stranded in sailing boats and all. How about at your place, were you in the sort of the tourist orbit?

LA PORTA: To some extent. We were on the marijuana route from Central Asia and people would come down to North Sumatra or take the small boats across to Aceh or find their way into Medan, work their way down to Jakarta and then eventually to Bali. Bali was the mecca. We had our share of disappearances. We had a couple of people who were overcome by fumes while they were hiking up one of the mountains that happened to have sulfur vents; we used to call it the "evil sulfur mountain." It was behind a little cottage that the consulate maintained to enable us to get up to the highlands and get some cool air. There was a lot of concern about tourists in Brastagi, the Lake Toba region and the Island of Samosir where they had marijuana-laced brownies and other delights. We had a serious issue with merchant seamen, one of them went bonkers and that was a nightmare. The guy kept escaping from custody and we could not find family members or others to take responsibility for him.

Q: Did you say, gee that's a consular problem and pass it on?

LA PORTA: No, we all pitched in.

Q: What happened?

LA PORTA: He was a seaman. He was an American of Cuban nationality and did not speak that much English. My wife used to take him food and things at the lockup at the public hospital. He escaped a couple of times simply by either suborning or threatening the attendants, so we had to go out and round him up and take him back until we got him repatriated. Those things were always very complex. We also had the death of a road contractor who was working on the road. He died of a massive heart attack, keeled over and was gone. A wonderful guy and we were very good friends with his wife and two daughters and it was quite a tragedy. Everybody pitched in on those cases.

There's one incident that I do want to talk about if you allow me to.

Q: Please.

LA PORTA: It was one of the lower lights of my career along with the Japanese Red Army having taken over the embassy in Kuala Lumpur, but I think it is also a story that tends to show how kind of the mindset of the military and the paranoia that anti-communism engendered in Indonesia that contributed to some not very fortunate things happened. It was late 1980, a Sunday evening and my wife and I and the kids were home. My son was six years old at the time and my daughter was ten. All of a sudden we heard a knock at the door. We didn't have any guards at the consulate residence, only a night watchman who kept an eye on the house at night when he wasn't sleeping. A soldier was at the door and he was in army uniform. Then there was a smaller man next to him in battle dress and they both had AK47s. The officer, whom I recognized as a colonel, I didn't know his name, explained that he came to our house because he wanted political asylum. At the point of a gun, moreover, he was going to make sure that we gave it to him. My wife, who tells this story in a more embellished way, said, "You can't come into my house with those guns."

We were dealing with an Indonesian who did not speak English. Fortunately my wife and I could speak the language. After some discussion, this colonel finally agreed to leave his friend with his AK47 outside. He came inside. We were trying to be as gracious as we probably could under the circumstances and I called one of our officers who lived across the street from me to come over.

After questioning this guy at length, it turned out that he had just completed a security seminar or indoctrination session in Siantar, which is a town about 40 miles from Medan and where there's a large army installation. Army officers and government officials generally were required to undergo indoctrination training periodically, sometimes every six months, sometimes more frequently, where they had to relearn the principles of Pancasila, the national ideology. The official ideology includes belief in one nation, belief in God and so forth. Pancasila was emphasized by the Suharto government to override religion and other belief systems and to supersede communism as an ideology. Some of these indoctrination sessions became quite heated and quite oppressive for the participants. This officer felt that he was being discriminated against because he was a practicing Muslim. He lived in South Sumatra and he felt that his life was in danger because other army people who hated Muslims were out to kill him. He wanted asylum in the United States for himself and his family. His family was still in South Sumatra and he had a wife and three children there. We immediately got on the phone not only to Jakarta, but also to Washington because of the AK47s involved. It was a potential terrorist incident.

Q: Well, when you get on the phone, you assume that you're bugged don't you?

LA PORTA: We did, yes. Of course, the rules is when you use the phone for immediate reporting is that you follow up as soon as you're able by an official cable so people have a complete record of what went on. That's exactly what we did. We also organized ourselves. Two officers stayed with him in our house. What was going on outside Indonesia relative to this kind of situation was also significant because in Moscow and in other places in the East Bloc the Russians were assaulting and killing some of the refusenikthe Jews who came to the U.S. embassies to seek political asylum. Our diplomatic premises were being inundated. The embassy's and Washington's concerns were to tamp down any possible hint of a situation that would lead to violence where the Indonesian authorities would have reason to come in with guns blazing or seek to take this guy by force. We wanted to prevent that.

The situation went on for three days. My wife and the children went to another officer's house and stayed there. We kept the colonel in our house, which was at least consular property. We got in touch immediately with the local authorities. We dealt with the regional military commander, a very good man, and we persuaded him to put a security ring around the residence, but at a distance so as not to be oppressive. There were no armed people at the gate or other visible signs of a security presence. We put our own guards on the gate from the consulate and we attempted to debrief this guy as best we could.

The first night, when my wife and children were still in the house, he was there we set him up in a guest room. That night he grabbed my son and he locked himself in a bathroom with my son. My son, who could speak pretty good speaking Indonesian at the time, talked his way out of it and he let my son go. That was one of the dicier moments that we had to contend with. Right after that my wife and kids cleared out and she went over to our friend's, the PAO's, house. We kept the colonel under strict control and we rotated going back and forth to the consulate so that none of us were there with him all the time. We tried to exploit him by getting whatever information we could. We dealt with the regional military command (KOWICHAN). The embassy said that there's one other important equity and that was we weren't to make the Indonesian intelligence authorities mad at us. They had had some discussions in Jakarta with the chief of Indonesian intelligence, Benny Murdani, and Murdani accused us, me, of suborning this officer. He accused us of being CIA agents and that we were out to infiltrate the Indonesian military, so we were the ones responsible for creating this situation. Fortunately that idea was dropped, but Murdani did remember the incident when I was in West Irian (Papua) in 1969 when I was accused by the foreign ministry of consorting with rebellious elements. Murdani remembered that or went back in his files, did his name check and brought that up with the ambassador. He claimed that I had been involved in unsavory things in the past and we think he's a CIA agent. Ambassador Masters, needless to say, made all the right noises and defended me and my officers against any charges. The way we did resolve it was through a negotiation with the regional military commander and also his provincial military commander in South Sumatra who happened to be a son-in-law of President Suharto. General Tri Sutrisno later became defense minister and chief of the armed forces. It was very strange that this army colonel, who felt that his life was at risk, still trusted his commanders. He still trusted the general in charge of the regional military command and he still trusted his own commander in Palembang, South Sumatra.

What we arranged was that the regional military command would fly his wife and children up to Medan which is about an hour and a half trip, that we would reunite them and then the military would take him and his family to Jakarta to an army hospital for psychiatric evaluation. As I remember, this was supposed to happen on Thursday morning. We worked out this arrangement over Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, having arrived on Sunday night. On Thursday morning I was with one of the other officers and we were at breakfast in the dining room. The colonel came out of his room and there was coffee set up for him. I was having breakfast. My back was to him and the other consulate officer wasn't in the room at that moment. He got a statue, a wooden statue of a snake, a fairly hefty piece of wood, about six inches around at the base and the tail of it went up about 18 inches. I still have it in my office downtown. He hit me over the back of the head with it. I later took 16 stitches in my scalp. We had a struggle and he tried to grab a knife. I beat him off; fortunately I was a little bit bigger than he was. Finally I threw him off me and he went into the back den and into the bathroom where he had held my son the Sunday night before. He grabbed a pair of scissors out of my wife's sewing basket and locked himself in the bathroom. He laid out a towel and was obviously saying his prayers when he attempted to commit suicide. He stabbed himself and slashed his wrists. We then called the military in from the street. I got up from the dining room floor and said, "Come in and get this guy." They broke down the door and got him out. He was still alive. The family did arrive later that day from South Sumatra and they did take him off to a psychiatric facility in Jakarta. The Indonesian army honored their agreement and they didn't waste the guy. My concern was for his life.

Q: When you say wasted you mean?

LA PORTA: To be killed. It was quite a little incident.

Q: Well, from what you've said it sounds like there was really derangement, paranoia or something. Were you, it's hard in another language, but were you sensing this was a problem maybe not so much of politics, but within the man's head?

LA PORTA: I felt it was entirely an individual case. I think that the colonel just snapped. He kept referring to conspiracies of people in the military who wanted to kill Muslims, who wanted to kill communists, and all of that was undoubtedly true to some extent. He was probably justified because the army harbored anti-Muslim sentiments at that time. The colonel was an extreme example, but he was clearly not rational. That was very clear. It was very difficult to get him back to reality and he kept looking around outside the house. He kept saying, oh, the soldiers are going to come and get me. That's why we kept the military away from the gate and pretty much out of sight. He thought they were going to come in and get him.

Q: Were you conveying to the military commanders who were dealing with this that you're really not talking about political asylum, you're talking about a mental problem?

LA PORTA: Absolutely. We said we have no interest in this man. We've never seen him before. Nobody had any connection with him. It is not our concern to want to embarrass or otherwise make things difficult for the armed forces. We have no intelligence or other interest in him. It took some persuading. It took a couple of days for them to figure this out and to get instructions from Jakarta so that they could play ball. Fortunately our relations with people in the regional military command were good and we knew the main intelligence officers there. I think we were credible to the J2 of the regional military command as well as of the provincial military command and the commanders themselves. We kept saying that our only interest was that we don't want bloodshed. You don't want it, it doesn't serve your interests, it doesn't serve our interests to have this incident on the front pages of the New York Times either. They took it on that basis, I believe. How I'm written up in the annals of the Indonesian intelligence agencies is something else.

Q: You didn't realize that as far as bloodshed goes yours would be included.

LA PORTA: I took 16 stitches. As my wife points out, I was being stitched up by the Mobil Oil doctor while I was on the telephone to Jakarta and to Washington recounting the end of the incident. It was quite something. It did take my family a while to get over it. We left Indonesia the next year and my son still had dreams of fear, a lot of fear. It took a few years for that to work through that because he was just six years old at the time.

Q: Did the military try to make up to you or were they so embarrassed that it kept relations strained?

LA PORTA: Relations were strained. It was very interesting. Subsequent to the incident, the military became very quiet. They just simply didn't want to deal with it. When we wanted to find out what happened to the officer They wouldn't volunteer anything to us. We always had to ask. I learned three years later that in fact he did survive. He was in a military hospital. He was rehabilitated and was released.

Q: While you were in Medan, was there much of a flow of students or visitors to the United States particularly from Sumatra?

LA PORTA: Not as much as there might have been. I think that the flow of students and exchange visitors was largest from Jakarta because the universities there had the status and most importantly the pool of English language qualified people. In North Sumatra and generally in the provincial cities, the further you got away from Jakarta, the fewer people you found who could manage academic English.

That said, we did send from North Sumatra several academicians and political leaders who are today active in Jakarta on the national political scale. Given the thin base of people we had to choose from, I think we did reasonably well in IV grants particularly. As I mentioned we had a terrific branch PAO, we had a very active educational advisory service and we had a very active English teaching program in Medan. We did a lot of work with several local universities and we paid a lot of attention to Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh and one or two universities in Sumatra province. Today the higher education field is much more crowded and there has been major growth in private universities. During my time in Medan, it was easier to pick winners and identify promising people.

Q: Were any other consulates there?

LA PORTA: Yes. We had full time consular representation from the UK, the Indians, the Dutch (but not the French), Singapore and Malaysia. We had a few international organizations represented. UNDP, ADB and a couple of others had projects in the region.

Q: Did they play much of a role, I mean were you all playing a collegial role or each one sort of doing their own thing?

LA PORTA: Pretty much doing our own thing. The main interest was mercantile. Malaysia and Singapore were concerned with piracy and smuggling. Most consulates were concerned with refugees, but they were generally not concerned with political, human rights and other developments. The Brits we were of course closest to. They had one or two officers and the British Council, so to some extent we made common cause with them. There were also a number of honorary consulates. For example, one of the plantation owners was honorary consul of Switzerland. These honorary consuls provided good excuses for a party because they could afford to entertain. Between the Mobil Oil community, which was quite large at that time, and the small diplomatic/consular community, the Indonesians generally were able to socialize with foreigners. There was the Medan Club, whose members were the upper crust of society. that was left over from the colonial period. It was nice place to go and not far from our house. They had a nice bar, restaurant and movies a couple of nights a week. There were a few decent hotels. There was a very good Chinese hotel which had a good Shanghainese food and there was the old Dutch hotel which was quite nice. The social life was very good. We had lots of friends in the NGO community as well. One of our good friends was the brewer of beer, Bintang, which was almost the Indonesian national beer. It was partly owned by Heinekens and the brewmeister was a German. We also found a lot of good fun with the Hash House Harriers. I don't know if you've run into that outfit before.

Q: I've heard the name.

LA PORTA: The Hash House Harriers were a running club started by a group of desultory bachelors in Ipoh in the plantation country of Malaya. The Hash in Medan met weekly for the men's hash, the women's hash and a family hash. They would set a trail in the boondocks and you had to go out and follow this cross country trail for a couple of hours of running or hiking. It was usually about ten miles. It would be over hill, over dale, through the jungles and rivers and that kind of thing. You'd go out and do that for two hours and then come back for a big beer party. For the men's hash it was a big rivalry for the runners and lots of beer was always consumed. Everybody in the hash, men, women, children, had a hash name and some were quite inventive. You were known by your hash name. There was a whole ritual associated with this outing. We've been in a number of countries that have had the Hash House Harrier groups. There are worldwide Hash and, it's quite an international fraternity.

Q: Well, other than being hashed or whatever, is there anything else we should cover do you think?

LA PORTA: I think we've probably covered quite enough. It was an extraordinary tour of duty in a lot of respects, not in the least because of the incident with the soldier who went around the bend, but it was a great post for the family, lots of excitement, lots of things to do. We went fairly often to Penang and to Singapore. As I said it was easier to get to than Jakarta. My family and I went to Bali a couple of times. We went to Sri Lanka on one R&R. People said, you're going from Sumatra to Sri Lanka for R&R, you're out of your mind, but it was okay.

Q: Yes. Well, then we'll pick this up the next time in 1981.

LA PORTA: I came back to the War College.

Q: Today is the 14th of June, 2004. Al, you were at was it the army War College, what was it?

LA PORTA: I went to the National War College, 1981 to 1982. When I was in Medan I was fortunate enough to be selected for the War College in the normal bidding cycle but it was something I really wanted to do because of my pol-mil experience. As the aphorism goes, it's the best professional year you'll have in the Foreign Service and that was exactly true. You do all the things in War College that the Foreign Service never provides in the way of professional development. The War College, not only in terms of professional and intellectual skills, but also management, planning and program management is to be valued very much. I think it still is today.

It takes the State Department at least a decade, if not 15 years, to catch up to where the military is in its War College training. After abolishing our Senior Seminar, we've just established our own Senior Threshold program to parallel DOD's. But whatever State does in professional training, it is always a pale shadow of what should be done and what the military does. The War College, and especially the National War College at Fort McNair, is a rare privilege for a Foreign Service Officer and it really locked in the skills I had developed over the years to do political military work. I could not have chosen to serve with a finer group of officers, including many who were in my committee, (as you know, War College classes are broken down into committees, like a "home room" in high school, of about 25 officers each). They make an effort to make sure that they are multidimensional so that there are civilians and military in each committee. Among the military officers we had Chuck Krulak who served two terms as commandant of the Marine Corps, following in his father's footsteps. We had Buster Glosson who as a lieutenant general commanded the air war in Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf. We had another officer named John Jumper who was chief of staff of the Air Force. We also had a navy captain at that time, by the name of Ted Schaffer who became deputy CIA director and who was also deputy director of NSA. It was quite a constellation of talent.

Q: Did you find that in many ways the Air Force and the Navy almost fight their own wars whereas the Army has to really get down on the ground and take more cognizance of international affairs. Did that come out at all or is that wrong?

LA PORTA: I think it's pretty much of a mixed bag. I think, even with the Army, you have people for whom, let's say, political-military concerns are certainly secondary or remote. For example, if you serve in certain branches like ordinance or artillery, you just don't get exposure to political issues. But if you're in a command position and in the infantry or armor, you're more likely to rise to positions where your military and political skills are combined. The Air Force had a reputation for being techies or missile jocks, whereas the Navy drives ships and doesn't do much else. This was the view before the Goldwater Nickels Act of 1987. There was talk in the War College about the military doctrine of "jointness," about how to work together not only in the tactical war fighting sense, but also, in a staff and policy sense. The big threshold changes throughout the military came in 1987 with the implementation of Goldwater Nickels. It's interesting that General Jumper today is developing a corps of political advisors to make sure he has one major or lieutenant colonel in each significant air force command who is a pol/mil specialist, whether in a specific geographic region or who has experience with the State Department.

The Navy has always been a mixed bag, in my view, because you still have dedicated "ship drivers" and aircraft drivers. Mostly they come out of the Naval Academy and they have a pretty narrow culture. They're not broadened until much later in their careers. You do find a minority of navy officers who come from other places. For example, my commander in Naples, the commander of Allied Forces Southern Europe, was a political science major at the University of Maine. He came up through the ranks as a pilot, then went to work for Colin Powell in the very late '80s and then worked for Secretary of Defense Cohen. With this background he went out to a major command and his political military genius really flourished.

Coming back to your point, I was surprised at the War College there were many broad-gauged people in the class. Even Marine Corps lieutenant colonels who had been troop commanders also had very interesting academic backgrounds or had expertise in areas that one would not associate normally with a line Marine Corps officer.

Q: Well, actually one of the things that have come out of many of my interviews is that people have found that the Marine Corps officers, the ones who get up to the War College level, really are almost superior to anyone else in the breadth and vision, where you think a Marine Corps colonel, he knows how to charge up a hill, but I mean people I've talked to, that's not their experience.

LA PORTA: I would very much agree with that and that was certainly the experience in our class of '81 to '82. We had Foreign Service Officers. We had about 13 or 14 FSOs from different geographic areas; by and large all were all officers who acquitted themselves very well, then we had a number from the other agencies, not only "the" other agency, but from Library of Congress, from DIA and other places.

Q: By the way, this was '81 to '82, did that class, the FSOs there, by this time had most of them not had military experience? You know, there was a period where all of us practically were male, white and we all had, almost all of us had been in the military, but I was wondering by this time.

LA PORTA: Remarkably few of the FSOs at the War College in my class had ROTC commissions or direct experience with the military in some way. Some officers made a specialty of it, like John Finney, and had served in a number of POL/MIL jobs before they came to the War College. Certainly the majority of the FSOs who were in my War College class did not have direct military experience.

Q: I think the tremendous benefit I think that the Foreign Service gives out is to mix and both pass on their knowledge, but also to gain an appreciation of the military side and not to think of warriors as being a class apart.

LA PORTA: One thing I don't think we know in a corporate sense is that how many War College graduates go on to political-military jobs, which may say something. They may have jobs in State Department bureaus or overseas posts where they have things to do with the military, but there is no career system which says okay, now that you've gone to War College, you should have a job with a significant POL/MIL content afterwards. That's why we're always reinventing the wheel in the State Department when it comes to looking for officers with pol-mil expertise.

Q: You were saying there's no way.

LA PORTA: There's no way in State to identify with any certitude people who have had the schooling and experience in POL/MIL assignments. This is important now, since 9/11, the Afghan conflict, other demands of the war on terrorism, not to mention Iraq, people are now saying that we need a corps of State Department people, POL/MIL experts, who can serve in post-conflict situations or have skills like POLADs (Political Advisors)or have skills in humanitarian relief where they have in fact worked with the military. Our personnel system just doesn't provide for this.

At the War College, I mostly took courses in non-Asian subjects, including European and arms control affairs. We took several short field trips but I missed the visit to Eastern Europe, for which I was signed up, because my wife was in a serious automobile accident (not her fault). She was hospitalized for a week right at the time I was supposed to be on the War College trip. So I stayed back in DC. When it came time to do my War College thesis, however, I reverted to my Asian experience and did a paper with a CIA officer on military cooperation in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

Q: You got out in the summer of '82. Where did you go?

LA PORTA: I had almost precooked an assignment after War College that I would become the deputy director of the Office of Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma and Singapore Affairs in the East Asia Bureau (IMBS). The "B" in the acronym, which was originally Burma, was shifted to the Thai desk so we became Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore affairs. I served in that job from roughly June of '82 until I shifted to management in the fall of 1985. So, I served in IMBS for over three years.

Q: Okay, looking at this first place, where stood Indonesia, I mean Indonesia I take it would have been your major focus, wasn't it

LA PORTA: The East Asia Bureau at that time (the Bush Administration) was headed by Richard Solomon. We had a number of political appointee deputy assistant secretaries but, by and large, there was considerable continuity as most of the office directors, deputies and desk officers had experience in the countries they worked on.

Q: Where stood Indonesia at that time?

LA PORTA: Indonesia was kind of in a parlous state. We had come through the Carter administration when there was a decided de-emphasis on most of Asia and there was a preeminence of human rights concerns. Most of the attention various Asian countries got during that period was pretty negative. Also Indonesia, as we had discussed earlier, was still suffering from its record in East Timor back in 1974 and '75. Indonesia in the mid '80s was carrying a lot of baggage. It was difficult to get a lot of people in the room to talk about Indonesia. Normally if you convoke the interagency community of those people who had spent a significant amount of time on Indonesia policy issues, whether economic, military or otherwise, you'd be lucky to have ten people in the room. Our job on the desk was very much like what I'm doing noto get some profile for Southeast Asian issues. To a considerable extent that was through ASEAN, through regionalism. I had done my War College thesis on ASEAN military cooperation; if you talk about lost causes, there's one. Our office had an active role in staffing the ASEAN post ministerial consultations and what in the '90s became to be the security dialogues known as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Q: When you talk about ASEAN, let's see you again, have what countries?

LA PORTA: On the desk? We had Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore, so four out of the then six ASEAN countries. The others being the Philippines and Thailand.

Q: Where did the Philippines fit into this?

LA PORTA: The Philippines had their own desk. The Philippines, if my memory serves me correctly, was a single country desk and that was because of the alliance relationship and the U.S. troop presence. So, you had the office of Philippine affairs, the office of Thai-Burma affairs, and then VLC, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodian affairs. The Southeast Asia checkerboard is how you divide up the landscape in terms of how many offices you have and how many directors, how many staffs. There were those of us who vainly argued over the years that there should be a single office of ASEAN affairs covering all of Southeast Asia. If you had what I would call a super-office and staffed it properly with a director and two or three deputy directors reporting to a DAS or having a DAS of its own would have been a far more efficient organization.

Q: We're looking at Indonesia at the time, how was, was Suharto in bad odor by this time or not?

LA PORTA: Suharto was not in bad odor in the early '80s. During the early '80s, kind of the corruption in the system and the venality of the first family with the "first children" being involved in all kinds of rip-offs had not yet come to pass or were not easily apparent. We knew of course there was corruption. We knew there were abuses, in particular in the military. We knew that the military was making money. We knew that they had their own profit making centers, but those things were understood and pretty well contained. In other words, they didn't have the effect on the overall economy so as to bring the entire system down that later occurred in the late '90s. In the early '80s, the thrust here in Washington was to work around the human rights issues. We spent a lot of time on Timor and a few other things.

We also tried to work hard to maximize U.S. interests in terms of regionalism because we thought that that was where the future was.

Q: Where did Irian Jaya fit into this? Was there a problem or was it sort of a place left on its own?

LA PORTA: At that point Irian Jaya, Papua or West Irian, whichever name you prefer, was fairly quiet. Most people, including us in the State Department, were trying to focus our attention on economic development in that area, being the poorest and most remote of the regions, as well as in Aceh. The rebellion in Aceh was fairly quiet at that time. There were no big issues. There'd be an occasional depredation or security alert in the Mobil Oil area of Southeastern Aceh, but by and large internal dissidence and rebellion were not the norm. We didn't really focus a lot on it. What we did do regarding human rights and other concerns was to try to get the government to understand that it had to promote basic economic development in these areas. You were talking about very basic activities like some fairly primitive African states, and to make sure that the Indonesian government got in to do what it could to promote nation building, education, building infrastructure and so on.

Q: What was happening in East Timor?

LA PORTA: Well, East Timor was a discomfort in the sense that the military was largely responsible for controlling East Timor affairs, although they did have a Timorese governor and Archbishop Belo was just beginning to make himself known as the religious leader of East Timor. During the 1980s the military was basically moving in on the coffee culture. They were opening up a lot of new land for coffee plantations. There were relatively few security-related incidents during that period. There was not a kind of a high tide or a rising tide of security incidents where the pro-freedom rebels or other groups were making a whole lot of trouble. You'd have occasional firefights, but usually out in the up-country areas that were hard to document.

We did have a problem with Timorese who fled the region in the 1970s. Many of these people were still stuck on offshore islands as "internally displaced persons" or IDPs. They were being brought back into resettlement camps off the South coast of Timor, so the conditions in those camps were a significant focus of the refugee bureau at State and others who provided resources for relief, training and trying to help alleviate living conditions in those camps.

Q: Was there a feeling that the Indonesian's central government could have placated the Timorese by putting a few more roads in there? In other words, it's a small area, make an effort to make things nice for them or not?

LA PORTA: By all objective indices, the ones that we used to cite, whether they were World Bank figures or ADB figures or even the Indonesian government's own figures on a per capita basis, the government's development budget for East Timor ranked above any other place in the country. The development budget for Papua was probably second in the total amount that the government spent on development projects. That said, there was a lot of the outback, particularly in remote mountain areas or villages, that simply wasn't connected with the central part of the province.

Q: Say we're concerned with human rights. What was going on? I mean I take it that the human rights thing was pretty well concentrated on Timor and on Aceh.

LA PORTA: There were more human rights concerns at that point in Papua than in Aceh. Aceh was pretty quiet. I may have mentioned that during my previous assignment in Medan that Aceh had a reasonably good civilian provincial government. The security concerns were in a clear second place. That was not true in East Timor. On the security side, there were bands of rebels, pro-freedom Timorese that were still marauding in the mountains. The man who is today the president of East Timor, Xanana Gusmao was a rebel leader. He and the exiled Timorese leader Jose Ramos-Horta were later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I'll be totally counterculture on this but Xanana was a killer. He was a terrorist. He was the leader of rebel groups in the mountains and himself were was responsible for a lot of killing, murdering, intimidation of all sorts which reached a peak in the mid '90s.

Q: Every once in a while there have been causes which attract the glitterati or whatever you want to call it, of the jet set or the public relations, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, etc. Were you seeing this as something, I mean all of a sudden; was this almost a European/American glitterati type creation of the Timor thing?

LA PORTA: Most of those movements that you mentioned became very chi-chi, very fashionable in the post-Carter administration period. At the same time we were struggling with various insurgencies in Central America and South America including the Shining Path that is still with us today.

Q: In Peru.

LA PORTA: In Peru. You also had the separate rebel movements in Guatemala as well as Nicaragua. The area was littered with them and they attracted a lot of attention from people on the liberal spectrum and from human rights organizations who saw them as real freedom fighters, as distinct from people who were seeking narrow advantage in terms of wanting to seize power or seize economic assets. I think it's fairly clear that in Aceh for example, the Aceh Merdeka Movement, or GAM, frankly was dedicated to intimidation and violence to seize economic assets. The GAM has some interest in Acehnese identity, but not interested in governing or seeking an arrangement with the central government where it could be a responsible partner, rather than an armed adversary. The situation in Papua was much more diffuse because of the tribalism of the region in which there are 13 major tribal, ethnic and linguistic divisions. Most of the time, even today, these tribes, especially the ones in the least advanced interior of the country, spend a lot of time fighting with each other over fields and streams and where they get their berries or pick their coconuts or their mangos, since they are hunters and gatherers or their trade routes where they get their supplies. The Free Papua Movement, or OPM, in the 1980s was still rather diffuse, but I think that the government at that time was making a fairly good effort in education, trying to organize effective governance and trying to promote some economic development like the Freeport copper mine that could raise significant amounts of revenue. It was far less of a military run operation during that period and the military did not have significant interests in logging and some other economic areas that it does today.

Q: Well, moving over to Brunei, I mean this is a place that hardly ever raises a blip on the international scene except when we need money or something like that. What were our interests there?

LA PORTA: Our interests in Brunei politically were to simply keep the peace because Brunei was still a thorn in the side in the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. It was the Sultan of Brunei who opted out of the federation at the last moment and the Bruneians have not been forgiven entirely. This occurred because of the Sultan of Brunei (it was the so-called old sultan whose name slips me at the moment) who was in his '70s. He's the one who guided Brunei throughout the post-World War II period. He was propped up by the British as a Crown Colony and then became head of the Bruneian independent state. The old sultan just did not want to be second banana to somebody in Malaysia. He most importantly wanted to control his own economic assets, basically offshore oil and gas, the deposits of which are substantial. There's also a silly little territorial claim that goes on between Sabah and Brunei; this was a little finger of territory that was not included in the sultan's area by the British, but it is an anomaly because it cuts deep into the center of Brunei. It should have been given to Brunei, but wasn't and is a bone of contention with Malaysia that comes up periodically.

There was also the undefined border with Kalimantan in the far South, but by and large that was manageable. Our approach to Brunei was as part of ASEAN to allow them to work out issues in a neighborly way.

There were a lot of funny things of coursBrunei being a quirky place. The old sultan very much admired Winston Churchill and had a huge statue of Churchill built right in downtown Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital. He created the Churchill Museum, which is quite an interesting place actually, one of the few places in town where you could actually go and see something. During the '80s, they were a little less fastidious about things like drinking (the Chinese restaurants served alcohol) and dancing. I think there was still a nightclub in town at the Sheraton Hotel that the sultan owned. Brunei was still partially developed in that the sultan kept control and he passed around lots of money and favors. Bruneians for the most part didn't have to work very hard. They got lots of public holidays. They got free schooling, virtually free housing and significant parts of the economy were subsidized to keep the prices low. Anthony Burgess wrote a little known book called Devil of a State (he was more famous for Clockwork Orange). It's quite a funny little book because it talks about this mythical sultanate in Africa that is so inbred and has its own quirky system that it really can't relate to anything going on the outside. That pretty much summed up the way Brunei was.

Q: How about Malaysia? What was up in Malaysia during this time?

LA PORTA: For Malaysia it was a time of pretty good U.S. relations. There were several things that were going on of note. Number one, there were major U.S. investments in Malaysia during that period in electronics assembly and chip making in places like Penang, Kuala Lumpur and some other towns. It was a time of the growth of large industrial states. Telephone equipment was also being manufactured there by U.S. companies. Also, clothing manufacturers began to move in. Commercial relations occupied a lot of our time. It was also the time of big growth of the palm oil industry and there were some significant advances in natural rubber processing. The latex industry and latex products manufacturing really took off in Malaysia during that period. Companies like Johnson and Johnson and the medical industries in the United States, were interested in either in investing in or purchasing these kinds of products including surgical gloves, rubber gloves for household use that had high latex content, condoms, and all kinds of other interesting things.

Q: What about palm oil, was this for soap or things like that?

LA PORTA: Palm oil had a number of industrial uses and was highly sought by U.S. companies like Colgate, Proctor and Gamble, Kraft Foods, General Foods because it is an inert commodity that if you add it to other things it doesn't change the chemical compositions. So it has become an important ingredient of food products in the United States and in Europe. A lot of margarine was wholly made of palm oil. Palm kernel oil was also valued for manufacturing some medicines, but also perfumes and cosmetics. It was a very highly sought after commodity then as now. Palm oil production was really taking off in Malaysia.

Q: Who were running the plantations? You know, it used to be run, I thought the British were doing this, but by this time was this pretty much a home grown?

LA PORTA: The British were still there and you still had companies like Harrison Crossfields and a number of eminent plantation companies involved there. You also had some Chinese investment in the plantation sector, both rubber and palm oil.

Q: Talking about Chinese at this point we're talking about Taiwanese or?

LA PORTA: No, you're talking Hong Kong Chinese.

Q: Oh, Hong Kong.

LA PORTA: Jardine Mathieson, Sime Darby and companies like that. They were very big in the plantation sector in Malaysia. The Malaysian government itself started a plantation development corporation, a state owned corporation that had its mandate to transform land into plantation growing areas and to provide technical expertise for planting rubber and palm oil. There was a palm oil institute where the seedlings were grown. They were improving the stock in rubber and coffee as well. They had a very aggressive campaign during these years to expand their plantation industry.

Q: What was the government like?

LA PORTA: The government at that point was run by Prime Minister Abdul Razak who was the successor of the Tunku and he was succeeded by Dr. Hussein Onn who was everybody's loyal lieutenant as deputy prime minister. It was a period of government stability. Razak and Hussein Onn were trusted and respected by the people. They were clean. There was very little hanky panky that you could point out in government circles. By and large the government tended to its knitting. Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamed, was back in politics. In the early and mid '80s he was the minister of education. He advocated a "Malays first" policy to uplift the economic status of the Malay part of the body politic. There were strains that were occasioned by this "Malay first" rhetoric. You also had the factor of the progressive Islamicization of the country which began in the mid '70s. By and large it was manageable and peaceable; it was not radical and you had a certain amount of political jockeying, but UMNO, the United Malays National Organization, as the preeminent member of the national front coalition was firmly in control. There were a couple of interesting minor Chinese parties, one that formed in the government in Penang and another splintered Chinese party, the DAP, that was in opposition. In the long scheme of things the opposition didn't account for terribly much and they were dragged along by the national coalition. Indian politics were quiet.

Our own relationship with Malaysia at that time was pretty constructive. I proposed and organized the first U.S.-Malaysia security dialogue which was held in 1985. This was the culmination of several years work in the State Department to get our military into more of a dialogue with senior Malaysian civilians and the military hierarchy. That relationship has paid innumerable dividends today and even was supported by Mahathir when he became prime minister.

Q: Was this looking beyond...I mean at that time we were beginning to think that maybe the Philippines will always be there, there's Clark Field and in other words we want to spread ourselves around a little more. Was that part of the thinking or not?

LA PORTA: I think there were several things that drove it. Number one, the military was very much interested in having "other options." They may not have been bases, but they were very interested in military activities in Malaysia, as well as in Singapore, and those are still valid today. For example, even during those years we did send U.S. Special Forces and others to train at the Malaysian jungle warfare school and training areas in southern Malaya. We were also interested in using Malaysian air force aerial ranges for fighter aircraft training in eastern Malaysia, and of course we were very much interested in Straits transit just as we are today from the maritime security standpoint. We were interested in surveillance of the Straits and we did have a relationship, through something called the Five Power Defense Arrangement, which I noticed that the Malaysian defense minister has just trotted out yet again. The Five Power Defense Arrangement, FPDA as it was known, is a little known agreement that involves Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. The FPDA is the basis for the air patrolling regime over the Strait of Malacca and further south in Singapore. All of these countries have cooperated in a very quiet way in exchanging information. The British haven't participated in FPDA air patrolling for many years, but the Australians will send aircraft to Penang to interoperate with the Malaysian air force.

Q: What were we looking at, piracy or?

LA PORTA: We were looking at piracy. We were also looking for unrecorded, let's say Soviet, overflights of Southeast Asia, aircraft coming from India going to Southeast Asia, to Vietnam or vice versa. These flights were important when the Soviets were using bases in Vietnam.

Q: Cam Ranh Bay?

LA PORTA: Cam Ranh Bay was the principal one. There was a certain amount of that kind of surveillance going on. We also had a deep intelligence operation in Singapore that we have maintained for many years to surveil the southern entrance to the Strait of Malacca. Our military was interested in cooperating through the FDPA in exchanging data with Malaysia as well as Singapore. We were interested in the jungle warfare training. We were interested in the aerial training. We were at that time, and in a little heralded way, thank goodness, sending ships regularly through the Strait of Malacca or on patrol, only we called it friendly transit. There was no obvious surveillance. We didn't send a carrier task force through fully armed, with full air cover and full escorts, but when we did transit we always had some kind of quiet exercise activity with the Malaysian navy or air force. We got officials including Prime Minister Mahathir, as cranky as he was about the United States, to visit an aircraft carrier. We invited many Malaysian VIPs out to transiting carriers and other ships.

We started a security dialogue with the Malaysians. The first meeting was in 1985 and the second in 1986. We started it by inviting a high level delegation from Malaysia to come to the United States for two days of meetings at Airlie House down here in Virginia. We invited a couple of academics and our intermediary was the Institute of Strategic and International Studies in Kuala Lumpur. It's the counterpart of CSIS Washington here. We corresponded through ISIS, but their delegation included officials from the foreign ministry and the armed forces. Prime Minister Mahathir designated his brother-in-law, who was deputy chief of the armed forces staff (his wife was Mahathir's sister) to be the unofficial leader of the delegation. Participants were senior military and political people from the foreign ministry as well as ISIS. I believe there may have been one or two Members of Parliament in the group. We got speakers from State and DOD. The next year we met in Malaysia and they hosted it at ISIS. We were extremely well treated by the Malaysian government. That was a real achievement.

Q: By this time was Cornell playing any particular role in terms of it had played during the '60s as opposing American government policy in Indonesia.

LA PORTA: The Institute of Southeast Asia Studies.

Q: Was this no longer, I'm probably overusing the term, but radical, but influential organization?

LA PORTA: During the 1980s they weren't interfering very much in the political sense. Although Cornell's program reached a very high state of development, Cornell was diversifying its focus away from Indonesia to other areas. They were interested in Vietnam, that was a time when we were starting to get over the fall of Vietnam. It became acceptable to begin talking about Vietnam and talk about political change there. I went up to Cornell a couple of times during those years. I talked to student groups and met with the professors. The most important thing that Cornell had and still has is its collection of materials on Southeast Asia and on Indonesia in particular. It's probably the premier collection of documents, papers, books and other materials in the U.S. because it has documentary holdings that the Library of Congress doesn't have. It is probably better than the Library of Congress in some of its Southeast Asia collections.

Q: How about Singapore?

LA PORTA: Still uptight. It was always a sport, whether in Singapore or Malaysia, to talk about the political succession, particularly successors to Lee Kuan Yew and when that would come about. We'd all take bets on it and debate which generation of successors were you talking about. As in Indonesia, it was fashionable to speculate on post-Suharto Indonesia and how that transition would work out. I think that in Singapore Goh Chok Tong had emerged as Deputy Prime Minister and the succession to Lee Kuan Yew was pretty well set. There was some interesting speculation that increased in the late '80s and early '90s about Lee's son, who now will become Prime Minister. You had the emergence of a couple of very good kind of quasi technocrats. Tony Tan Ken Yam was finance minister. He's now the Deputy Prime Minister. Singaporean leaders under Lee's sharp eye, when he was Prime Minister or in the last decade and a half as the "senior minister," found that if they equip themselves well they have long track records. By and large they've all done pretty well in providing sound government.

Q: Did we have the relationship of sort of very quietly using the expertise of the Singaporeans to repair ships and do a lot of actually military support activities?

LA PORTA: Yes, indeed. There had always been the use of Singapore as an entrepï¿½t for resupply and minor repairs. One of the issues during that period, in which we in State as well as DOD were directly involved, was the nuclear powered warship issue. It all came down to a matter of liability. The Singaporeans were entirely agreeable to allowing nuclear power warships to enter Singapore, but they had to improve some docking facilities in order to comply with nuclear safety requirements. There also had to be an agreement on liability between our two governments. That was probably the most difficult thing we had to face. Negotiations on the agreement went on for years as only the DOD lawyers could drag it out.

Q: Were we concerned about Islam, particularly in Indonesia, but elsewhere at that time?

LA PORTA: I don't think that it was a cardinal focus for us. I think that we felt that we certainly understood where the fundamentalist movement in Malaysia stood and the political aspects of it. I don't think that we saw radical or violent Islam really raising its head in Indonesia in any particular ways. While we were not entirely comfortable, we did maintain a very close watching brief on Muslim political parties and social elements and Islamic populations in the universities. We tried to do what we could to make sure that we had positive linkages there. Unfortunately, a lot of things that were disruptive to our relations with the Islamic community in Southeast Asia are still the ones that trouble us most today. Those are events in the Middle East. So every time whether it was the '57 War, the '67 War or one or another outbreak of Israel-Palestine difficulties, it always had a ripple effect on our relations with the Islamic communities in Southeast Asia. It is not correct to say, as I was writing to someone this morning in Jakarta, that Islamic extremism is or was entirely aided and abetted by external factors. Internal factors, such as Suharto's tight political control had more to do with Islamic political sentiment, but overseas developments were certainly an element. Where we were in the mid '80s on these issues was probably in a period of relative stability in the relationship. Things got much worse later on.

Q: Was there as there is in every administration, but this was relatively early in the Reagan administration, a battle over Secretary of State, George Shultz, to try to get him to go to meetings and do things in your particular part of the world?

LA PORTA: I think that Ronald Reagan, and I guess it is significant that we're speaking a week after his death and state funeral. We felt in State at that time that Ronald Reagan had a specific outlook. He had a Pacific outlook. He looked out at it from his ranch. He's buried within sight of the Pacific. I think that the Reagan administration, certainly far more than the Carter administration, had a view of the Pacific in the positive sense in saying this is an area of natural U.S. interest. The Pacific is an area of the future. What we used to write about was the tremendous economic potential of the Pacific and its meaning to the United States, whether it be Japan or China. You recall that a lot of the "Japan is number one" stuff started in that period. China was still very closed, but was beginning to be viewed for its true potential, which we're now seeing it in dynamic and very real terms. In other parts of the Asian economy, Taiwan was vastly increasing its industrialization and exports to the United States. Singapore and Malaysia began to be important entrepï¿½ts for U.S. electronic and other kinds of manufacturing. Even the Philippines was absorbing some new industrial activity during the mid '80s. We began to see a lot of thickening economic interests with Asia which led us not only to look at ASEAN regionalism in the economic sense, free trade zones and an ASEAN free trade area, but also, it impelled us to look at the establishment of other organizations. The U.S.-ASEAN Business Council was founded with USAID assistance at that time. It's not insignificant that Colin Powell is addressing the U.S.-ASEAN Council tomorrow night. Our ambassadors in Southeast Asia started their ASEAN road shows where they go around to all the capitals of ASEAN and then come to a number of important commercial cities in the U.S., ending up in Washington to lobby Congress on ASEAN Southeast Asian concerns. That effort started during the mid '80s. We in the State desk were very much a part of that.

Other organizations began to arise. Something called the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC), which was tripartitacademic, business and government. An organization in my view that hasn't fulfilled its potential, but still even today does some relatively useful economic work. You had also a third organization called APEthe Asia Pacific Economic Council. This was a region wide thing and included South American countries as well as East Asia. APEC is made up of governments and they have an APEC summit every year. It's an important occasion for the leaders of all of the countries to get together once a year.

Q: I think it was under Clinton when he started attending and it became a major meeting I think at that time.

LA PORTA: The first one that the Clinton administration hosted was in Seattle on an island off of Puget Sound. APEC and the other regional organizations got very good support from George Shultz, again, a man of the Pacific. He's from Stanford, a renowned economist and he supported the growing regionalism and linkages between the Pacific countries of East Asia and the United States. We were very fortunate during the '80s, both the Reagan administration and the Bush administration, of having very strong support from the administration. The difference came between kind of the James Baker style and the George Shultz style. George Shultz knew how to use his staff, wanted people to be creative, wanted them to push forward on all the barriers, whether they be in Washington or in the region, to promote regional trade growth. James Baker just didn't have the personal interest. James Baker, apart from a few things, didn't know terribly much about Asia and wasn't as comfortable with it as George Shultz, needless to say. But Bush, Sr. certainly made up for it in spades. There was more than enough interest on the part of the White House to kind of overcome Baker's somewhat diffidence in approaching Asia matters.

Q: Did the shift from Secretary Haig to Shultz in 1982 affect your portfolio? What was working with Gaston Sigur like?

LA PORTA: The East Asian bureau under Assistant Secretary Gaston Sigur was low key. Sigur was a courtly academician (for whom George Washington University's China Center is now named). Sigur, as befitted his academic interest, was most engaged with China and frankly left most of the other things, except Japanese affairs, to his deputies and the country desks. Southeast Asia, except for Cambodia (viz. the annual struggle over Cambodian representation in the United Nations), had little front office attention other than residual human rights issues, such as the Indonesian presence in East Timor. There were few issues that engaged official Washington, thus most of our time was spent tending ("gardening" in George Shultz's words) to relatively discrete bilateral relations issues. Regionalism attracted little attention and the emphasis was on our traditional alliance relationships.

Q: Now, where did you go?

LA PORTA: After the East Asia bureau, I moved to the Office of Management Operations, to "M". I was in M for two years, but I carried most of my work from EAP with me.

Q: Okay. Today is the 16th of July, 2004 and you're off to Management/EAP I guess from '85 to '87?

LA PORTA: Right.

Q: What was your job?

LA PORTA: All of the officers in M/MO (Office of Management Operations) had the euphemistic titles of management analyst, which stood for absolutely nothing at all, and Bill De Pree was the office director. Don Peterson was the deputy office director during the first eight or ten months I was there and then he was subsequently replaced by George Moose. Bill is one of the true "salts of the earth" in terms of the Foreign Service and he headed a very small staff. We were about eight Foreign Service Officers and about another eight civilians. The Office of Management Operations was created by Under Secretary Ron Spiers who wanted an office at his elbow in order to be able to do project work and to give him independent advice.

The office had another important function to monitor staffing levels overseas. We were also responsible for handling post openings and closings. You'll remember the days when they had post classifications, and we inherited the residual functions of determining the size and nature of overseas missions no matter what they were. We also had a Civil Service unit of about four people headed by Carolyn Lowengart, a longtime Civil Service employee; she was a very fine professional woman, now retired, who was in charge of keeping track of the overseas deployments of other agencies. We operated the NSDD 33 process by which chiefs of mission overseas have the option to accept or reject staffing assignments from other agencies.

Q: When you say options are you putting quotations around the options, or did they really have the options?

LA PORTA: NSDD 38 was always a flawed process in the sense that the Department itself and especially anybody on the undersecretary level and above found it always inconvenient to be agnostic on overseas staffing interests because it wasn't in their interest to get into embroilments or antagonize other agencies, including "THE other agency" or "OGA" as its now called by some.

Q: OGA?

LA PORTA: Other Government Agency.

Q: Oh, I see. It's not our brothers across the river or?

LA PORTA: "OGA" now is the term of art for "the other" or simply "the other agency." OGA was brought into use by the military in Iraq.

Q: For somebody who is going to read this 30 years from now we're referring to the CIA.

LA PORTA: Of course.

Q: Anyway, just to clear it up.

LA PORTA: Or "Langley" whatever you want to call thethat mysterious turnoff on the George Washington Parkway. In overseas staffing, in the first instance the decision is always with the chief of mission. In those days probably 60% of the NSDD 38 cases were where an agency wanted to establish a presence in a country, wanted to increase staffing or in rare cases wanted to reduce staffing. These decisions usually were precooked with the ambassador and with the country team as well. It was a formalistic exercise to go through the process in which the ambassador was required to make a decision, to comment on the financial implications whether they had adequate space, and the security concerns of the mission if X personnel were assigned and a number of other things that people in State Department management were very much interested in.

One of the issues that we constantly struggled with was overseas administrative support and how to develop an equitable system of how to insure that other agencies paid their way, not only in real terms, such as office space and equipment and the like, but also in terms of hidden support costs and things that they relied on the embassy to do for them. For example, administrative processing of vouchers, property management, rentals, of importation of goods and effects and things like that for which the costs are not always obvious, the other agencies, being clever devils, always wanted to try to just foist these costs off on the State Department. There was always a constant debate about shared administrative support, how to do it more equitably, how to have more direct pass-through to the other agencies of direct costs, and the like. It was a very complex process, but one that was probably necessary, and I think continues to be necessary. It was motivation later for the Department in the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI), attempts to right-size posts, and again now because the management of the State Department is reinstituting an effort to determine the optimum size of posts.

Unfortunately, also caught up in the country planning process, are the gross amounts of resources in terms of personnel as well as dollars a post has to do its job. It requires the other agencies, and many of them don't want to play in that process, to be more transparent and to harmonize whatever they do do more fully with the country team and the ambassador's objectives. We were the guardians of that process. Ron Spiers, I will hasten to add, is a person who shrank from very few battles and, as a person of renowned integrity, really made an honest effort to deal with the other agencies. However, in many cases in dealing with Secretary Baker and some of the under secretaries he got little to no support. In these kinds of issues that generally applied even to George Shultz who did not want to raise "marginal" issues like overseas staffing with his cabinet colleagues. Incidentally those were also the years when planning began by Steve Low and others on building the new Foreign Service Institute.

Q: This institute is now called the Shultz Center and people who were involved all describe the fact that we have this institute where we're right now doing our conversation to the fact that George Shultz was for, no other Secretary of State in living memory except maybe the present one, Colin Powell, would have had interest in doing that.

LA PORTA: No question the others may have been somewhat interested, but never willing to put the money into it and to fight for it. One of the big issues in M, and again this is a continuing feature of State Department management, is the tension among the under secretary and his advisors, the bureau of personnel and the people who control the personnel numbers, and most importantly, FMP or the Financial Management bureau who actually control the money who control the personnel. There was never even a satisfactory resolution, in my view then or since, of how to adequately staff and support the Department's priorities even when your secretary or the under secretary for management had rather strong views as what these should be. For example, Shultz seeing that the CIA was competing for greater influence by posting more case officers and analysts overseas, started a "laid back" program to place more reporting and analysis officers (economic and political) abroad. He also wanted small "listening posts" one or two officer reporting postand fewer people in large embassies. Does this sound familiar? Well, neither the personnel nor financial bureaus were listening and, apart from 220 or so new positions that were authorized by Congress, they did little or nothing to honor Shultz' intent. They did not support a reorganization of posts and reallocation of resources to areas of greatest policy interest and need. They just spread out the new personnel resources to the bureaus on a "fair share" basis so there was little impact on the Department's substantive operations. Just a footnote in this respect. I spoke of Baker. I fast forwarded to the period after I came back from New Zealand when I worked on the Strategic Management Initiative in the Department and the "State 2000" planning exercise.

Q: One of the things, well, I'll ask the question and I'm pretty sure I know the answer, but were any of you sitting around saying, what if the Soviet Union implodes or something, what do we do about opening up new posts there. That I take it was not even a thought in anyone's mind?

LA PORTA: Post openings and closings was always number two controversy, in addition to overseas staffing, that we had to deal with. I think that institutionally Ron Spiers and M favored reducing the size of large consulates where we saw a diminishing need to have political and economic officers and doing other than special purpose work. They also wanted to close well known but marginal posts like Bordeaux, Lyon, Turin, Trieste, Venice and Florence. In other words, there has been a continuing view in State Department management of the need to shift out of lower priority, especially Eurocentric, posts, and many in Latin America as well, that have just been there because of history as opposed to keying them to priority functions. They wanted to take those resources and redeploy them to new areas: special purpose reporting posts in the outer islands of Indonesia or additional staffing in Japan or China which were a big focus of concern. This was just before the fall of the Soviet Union; in my view James Baker later made some very flawed decisions.

Number one, he said that the State Department would support the establishment of all the new posts in Russia, the former Soviet Union, and additional posts in Eastern Europe and take it out of the Department's hide in terms of personnel and budget. It was a wrong decision because everybody knew that the institutional forces of the European hands in the State Department showed no tolerance for giving up any resources and having them redeployed. Some bureaus and many sitting chiefs of mission, especially the political ones, were extremely astute in appealing to the president or to the congress to save one or another post. Bob Dole intervened many times to save Florence which is a lovely post. My relatives live there and it's a beautiful monument, but frankly, how much work do they do? Not very much. What is their importance to U.S. strategic or foreign policy concerns? Nil to none. I think these two arguments over overseas staffing over post presence continue to dog the Department under Condoleezza Rice's "transformational diplomacy."

We were constantly trying to seriously review what our post holdings were in relation to the substantive priorities, what then was the state of the country planning process, and where Ron Spiers and the other under secretaries saw the main points of policy emphasis.

Q: Were you able to get officers out from behind their desks? One of the real problems is that there was often an increasing role for sort of standardized reports often which don't make much sense and not much travel money. Your reporting officers are sort of stuck in the capital reading newspapers and writing reports for Ph.D. thesis in the Department of Commerce or something like that.

LA PORTA: Unhappily the situation got worse rather than better. One of the other officers in Management Operations did have the responsibility and we did have a project to analyze, and we did report to the Congress on this, the whole issue of statutory reporting and reporting for other agencies. This was particularly relevant to the Treasury Department where our whole financial reporting system was geared to pump information into Treasury as opposed to coming up with intelligent analysis that was more usable within the State Department. Indeed, our posts were and still are largely consumed with other agency reporting requirements, some of which are levied directly and many of which are levied indirectly. We did have an officer at that time who grappled with this, and we're still grappling with it. There are no good solutions because nobody wants to give up what they've come to expect in terms of substantive reporting and information.

We also had an interesting study during that time in Management Operations that looked at the question of the best management practices of large corporations. The idea was to look at management forms, organizational structure and how much time top executives at 3M, Kodak, or quasi-government organizations like NPR (National Public Radio) spend on personnel development. How much time is spent by senior administrators on training, how much time is spent on mentoring and similar kinds of activities. This was something that Ron Spiers was extremely interested in and the study was excellent. In fact we relooked at the same things again in the mid '90s when I was in AFSA.

Secretary Powell today is very much interested in making the State Department senior echelons look more like the best corporate practices. We did that; Management Operations did that kind of inceptional study and work in that area. Of course as so often happens, these things go up on the shelf and it takes someone a few years later to reinvent them or to remember them and revive them.

We had a very active office as I said. It was a small number of people. My own personal responsibilities were EAP, each management analyst had one or two regional bureaus to look after because of overseas staffing issues and following up on IG inspections for M. Then we also had functional concerns. Mine was post openings and closings and a few other things. I also handled the bureau Political Military affairs with which I had a great deal of experience and have since. In the pol-mil filed, there were continuing issues of how PM supported or didn't support political advisors, where we put them and what impact they had in the bureaucracy. I've dealt with those issues a few times since and it was very rewarding work.

Q: Were you running across the idea that surfaces from time to time and especially as communications get better, why do we really need these posts because you do everything by telephone or by fax? I mean this is before the full flowering of computer and e-mail. There's this idea that you really don't need, you can communicate with leaders this way you almost don't need to have people overseas. Was that an idea that was around at that time?

LA PORTA: There was some of that. I think it was easily refutable. On the other hand, the arguments were undermined by our own incapabilities in terms of having a communications system that worked well enough and some of the archaic practices, especially the Wang experience, in those days. On the one hand, it was very easy for people to say, well, we can dispense with traditional diplomacy (whatever that means) overseas and rely less on human intervention. The opposing argument is why is this being applied to the State Department when every other agency in the United States Government, including the military and the intelligence agencies, are beefing up their overseas staffs in real time.

In the technology area, and just having had a discussion in recent days with a very good friend of mine who is now involved in the task force to invent yet another messaging system for the State Department, we simply have never been good enough in order to really capitalize on the technology and the positive things that are out there.

Q: When you were doing this were there any great battles that you found yourself fighting regarding posts?

LA PORTA: We had basically a yearlong exercise in '85-'86. I was the secretary of the Department committee to review the overseas presence. We had a very large exercise to not only renew the data that we had, but also to examine a lot of these tradeoffs. It was horrendous in dealing or not dealing with other agencies and we tried to get the various upper levels involved. Ron Spiers tried to convoke the other agencies on the management level. We had enormous problems with AID and nobody cooperated. The State Department had no clout in those things and institutions like the NSC and the White House just didn't want to touch it because it was just too sensitive and got people angry. That was probably the biggest bureaucratic battle during those years, but I will have to say with a great deal of good will and for all the right reasons, Ron Spiers felt that this was something that he wanted to pursue. Unfortunately, the results were very meager indeed.

Q: How about our embassy in Moscow? At that time I can't remember the exact timing, but you know, we'd put up a new embassy in Moscow which was almost, it was riddled I think is the only term to say with listening devices because we allowed the Soviets to do it. Was that an issue when you were there?

LA PORTA: No question. One of the other issues that kept Ron Spiers awake at night, and of course the Department was subjected to daily vilification by Jesse Helms and all kinds of other critics. Here again, I think it's a perfect example of the consequences of under-funding and the Department technical management simply having not been good enough. We also had to implement the diplomatic security legislation and my office, not me personally although I did have some issues, but Bill De Pree and, especially in 1986-87, George Moose had a lot to do with how to set up the new Bureau of Diplomatic Security and the Office of Foreign Missions. All of that stemmed from reports within the administration as well as congressional pressure to heighten yet again physical and information security concerns within the Department. That was another huge brouhaha and I think that Secretary Shultz simply wouldn't deal with it because it was too emotive and none of the senior leadership of the Department wanted to make a decision that seemed to be anti-security. Everybody had to go along with it. This is a phenomenon that reinvents itself in the State Department.

Q: You mentioned Senator Helms. How helpful, or unhelpful, was the congress in supporting good management at State?

LA PORTA: The Department's strained relations with the Hiland right and left wing critics like Jesse Helmstemmed in my opinion from the political polarization over foreign policy since the McCarthyite error. To Helms and his ilk, every policy issue was zero sum and the Department was the favored scapegoat. Under these conditions, when the Hill had its way, it was always to the detriment of the Department and Foreign Service.

Q: Well, it's essential, I mean everything, you have the feeling, now today in 2004, it's cover your ass. The head of homeland security gets up and says, something can happen sometime and we're just warning you. In other words you have the feeling this is like I told you so. You were warned or something which is really a form of making sure that you don't seem like you don't know what you're doing which most of the time we don't.

LA PORTA: When you do have security incidents, and I'm not apologizing for the perpetrators in any way, it is impossible to justify the lives that have been lost in security incidents as well as other egregious lapses in security procedures. But this is an area again where the Department's bureaucracy never seems to be good enough. Normally because of under-funding, we wind up doing the job half right and never adequately. I think we continue to see this today in the inability to get new embassies built, although the situation is somewhat improved because of the bombings in Africa and in the kind of onslaught of terrorism. I go back to my one of my firm beliefs, and I've stated this before to you, that over the long span of years the Department and the U.S. Government as a whole have been in constant denial and have given only fitful attention to deal with terrorism and other kinds of security threats. We know terrorism has been around in its present form since the mid 1970s. The Japanese Red Army and all of these guys are still out there and yet our government has not prosecuted those things well enough and the Department more often than not has been on the back foot. Often as a corollary of that, we in the State Department often resort to overkill rather than cunning and skill in order to meet those kinds of challenges. On the one hand, we become more Draconian in the physical barriers that we impose and the outward signs of being secure rather than emphasizing counterintelligence and computer systems security.

Q: The Arab-Israeli, particularly the Israeli side on posts, did that get political? I mean the security of our embassy in Tel Aviv planning to move our embassy to Jerusalem and all during your time there was that something you had to deal with or was that something left to the New York presidential primaries?

LA PORTA: We had a couple of good Middle East hands who dealt with those issues very vociferously, Ed Peck having been one of them. I think that the Department showed a little skill in trying to walk through those various kinds of demands. Unfortunately as so often happens, when you deal with emotive issues or ones that are stirred up by one lobby or anothewhether it's Greek, Turk or Israeli, or one or two others even in those daythat you really were confronted almost with an insoluble problem in dealing with the Congress and within the administration. From the management point view you very often have to look at those kinds of things as constraints that you have to live with rather than problems to be solved because they simply don't go away.

Q: what would you cite are your major contribution in these administrative fights?)

LA PORTA: As a lone officer representing M in dealings with the bureaus or other agencies, I certainly had minimum clout. However, our direct access to Ron Spires, and sometimes others on the 7th floor, gave us a chance to argue the case for M's point of view.

Q: Well, then after being in this battle ground for a couple of years, in '87, where did you go?

LA PORTA: '87, well, it was very interesting. I had signed on to stay in Management Operations for another year and had gone into my third year by a couple of months when I got a call sometime around the middle of August from an old friend, Paul Cleveland, who was then Ambassador to New Zealand and he said, "Al, I need a DCM and you're it. Would you like to come to Wellington?" Needless to say I said, as tough as it is to leave Washington, I thought that was a jolly good idea. So, we set off for New Zealand and I had a four-year tour there.

Q: Did you take the FSI DCM course, or just go straight to post?

LA PORTA: I did take the DCM course and, if I remember correctly, we arrived in November.

Q: From '87 to?

LA PORTA: '87 to '91. There was a little window in there when one of the efforts of the personnel bureau was to lengthen tours of duty. This was something that everybody pretty much applauded. For about a year or a little more in 1986-87 people were being assigned at the senior levels, counselors of embassies and DCMs in the "developed countries for four years instead of three. Tours were lengthened as well for hardship tours in non-security sensitive locations generally to three years instead of two except for more junior officers and staff personnel who continued to have two year rotations. New Zealand was an interesting kettle of fish at that time because most people don't associate New Zealand with a lot of emotion or activity, but in 1985 a Labor government was elected to power and David Lange became the prime minister, thereby beginning the battle over nuclear policy.

Consequently New Zealand said no, I'm sorry, unless you have a policy which tells us whether you have nuclear weapons onboard your ships or whether your ships are nuclear powered. That is a declaratory policy, not just "neither confirm nor deny" (NCND) or whispering in their ears. Without some degree of ambiguity, we would not allow U.S. warships or military aircraft to come to New Zealand. That led to a brouhaha to suspend the ANZUS pact insofar as New Zealand was concerned. Today this is still a very serious matter between the United States and Australia on one hand and New Zealand on the other.

Q: Could you give us a brief description of the Embassy staffing when you arrived?

LA PORTA: Wellington was a typical middle-size embassy with four functional State sections (Pol, Econ, Cons, Admin/GSO), a commercial attachï¿½, an agricultural attachï¿½, and a defense attachï¿½ office with two military officers (Navy and Air Force). We had a consulate-general with three officers, mainly for consular work in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, and a consular agent in Christchurch on the South Island, mainly to take care of visa inquiries and assistance to U.S. tourists. Paul Cleveland, a career officer (one of the rare ones to New Zealand), was chief of mission in 1987-89 and he was replaced by Della Newman, a real estate broker from Seattle, in 1990-91.

Q: From what I gather I was talking to somebody rather recently on one of these interviews who was dealing with East Asia and was saying that New Zealand is almost off the map as far as timing on military things and all that.

LA PORTA: Well, it is except, and there are always exceptions, New Zealand has contributed special forces troops to Iraq, they had several hundred special forces troops at one time in Afghanistan, and they have supplied aircraft, ships and specialists, like medical and telecommunications personnel, for the Gulf patrol force. This was after the 1991 Gulf War and later. They have tried to do things to oblige us in areas that skirt around the nuclear policy; this was true under Labor governments as well as the National Party which was openly pro-U.S.

Q: It's becoming embedded in its political, its politics, no party can play with that. Is that right?

LA PORTA: New Zealand beginning in the '60s fancied itself as "clean, green and nuclear free." We used to say, only half in jest, that New Zealand was the westward extension of the protest movements in California. If all the leftists in "la la land" wanted a nice haven to go to, they'd just go to New Zealand. There were in fact several hundred of war resisters during the '60s and '70s who did go to New Zealand. Many academics took up residence there because of their difference of opinion with successive U.S. administrations on war issues and during the Reagan years as there is today under President Bush, George W. Bush, a real hatred of the United States. This ameliorated somewhat under Papa Bush, George H. W. Bush, because he was seen as an eminently reasonable person.

In 1991, soon after my departure from Wellington Bush basically threw out the "neither confirm nor deny" policy by saying that we're removing all nuclear weapons from warships, thus ending the nuclear weapon programs on our warships, except for nuclear powered warships. The cause celebre, let's put it that way, largely disappeared, but it was too late. The estrangement had already occurred. New Zealand does stand up rather well, however, even despite the rhetoric of the leftist Labor governments there and the current Prime Minister Helen Clark. They also have expertise in intelligence areas that are significant, if not important, to us. For example, they do a good job in intelligence and in the analysis of information pertaining to the Pacific Islands. They also have some technical intelligence assets that are significant to us.

Although they're very lacking in some capabilities because the defense budget is very low, the armed forces do have a very high standing in training and expertise. So the New Zealanders said there are some things that we can do that you don't want to do or find it politically inconvenient such as interventions or peace monitoring in various kinds of situations. They did participate in the peace monitoring in East Timor. They have brokered political stand-downs in Vanuatu and Papua, New Guinea and also in the Solomon Islands, but yet they remain politically estranged from us and from the Australians. The paradox is that beginning in the late '80s there was a determined campaign to promote New Zealand's economic interrelationships with Australia. Today there is a virtual common market between the two. Now fast forward to 2004, the United States signed a free trade agreement with Australia and now New Zealand is kind of an appendage of that. The question is when and whether the United States is going to have a free trade agreement with New Zealand itself to cover all the other areas where there is important trade to us. This is nearly 20 years later and the question of NCND and the nuclear policy still bedevils U.S. attitudes in that many of the people in the George W. Bush administration today were in the second Reagan administration or the George H. W. Bush administration and they remember the wrangling on the political level with New Zealand and don't have a good taste for it.

Q: Well, let's go to 1987. When you went out to New Zealand, what was the status at that time and what were you doing there?

LA PORTA: The status at that time is that the United States had formally suspended any security obligations to New Zealand under the ANZUS Treaty. Mil-to-mil relations were suspended in almost all respects although there were certain aspects of a liaison relationship that did survive, especially in the intelligence area. There was from the New Zealand point of view an "agreement to disagree" on the issue of nuclear policy. We never accepted that there was an "agreement to disagree" and Ambassador Cleveland and to a lesser extent his successor, a political appointee from Washington State, Ambassador Della Newman, were determined to maintain the United States position, together with the Australians, against the New Zealand nuclear policy. Paul Cleveland, who is a good and close friend to this day, very often took a strong public line and disagreed. There was a lot of public wrangling with the likes of David Lange and other leftist politicians.

This also ran up against the New Zealanders' sense of nationalism and independence. As an almost cast-off from the empire, colonized by very stalwart Scots and English settlers from the North of England, these people had a very independent strain and self-reliance. Indeed they deserve credit for basically turning very inhospitable and remote islands into a place that is extremely livable.

Q: I understand there is a very strong strain that came out from that area of the Labor movement, the British labor movement with sort of a Tony Benn labor types. If you're labor class, that's what you are and anyone else are capitalists and they're your enemy.

LA PORTA: Yes, I think that the original settlers of New Zealand were either small holders, the landless sons of the minor gentry, or were people who were just simply landless like coal miners. In New Zealand they met the Maori population which made it very interesting. My wife was an attorney and she worked with the law firms that did a lot of work on Maori land and similar issues. All in all, it's a place that prides itself on its rectitude in a very Scot's Presbyterian way. New Zealanders are wonderfully opinionated. They're not easily led in any direction. They just have this fierceness of spirit that maybe you find among small countries that are fairly isolated. New Zealand in a lot of these respects estranged themselves from the Australians. There's a lot of Aussie bashing that goes on. This has been ameliorated only a little bit by the Closer Economic Relations agreements between the two and a lot of cross investment, but the Australian character is very different is very different from the New Zealand character.

Q: I remember hearing just about this time the Australian ambassador came to DACOR House and gave a talk. He made one remark almost to the side, well, we don't want to make the same problem with immigration that the New Zealanders have and not get a bunch of pro-left wing laborites coming there. They sort of screw the country up.

LA PORTA: That may be an Australian conservative party position; yes, I can see that being said, but Australian laborites certainly would not agree with that. I think also the New Zealand's isolation or relative encapsulation as a little island country also allows its intelligencia to indulge in flights of fancy that may not appear to be real world from the U.S. point of view or perhaps an Australian point of view. The Australians made a threshold decision roughly in the 1980s that they were going to live in Asia. The New Zealanders are still undecided about where they live. Their immigration policiethese were the years when you had Cambodian refugees, Vietnamese refugees and all kinds of immigration from other places in Asiwere very "pro-white" and they accepted only those people who had superior intellectual skills, occupations that were needed, or had lots of money to bring. I think that there was an attitude in New Zealand, that we don't want our society to change too much, and they are proud of this little bit of arrogance. I may be overly critical because we had wonderful associations there and it was a fabulous place to live. We enjoyed every minute of it and, with the exception of Naples, we had the nicest housing and living and working conditions.

Q: I understand Sundays can be a time of boredom living there.

LA PORTA: It used to be that Sundays, all shops but the little dairy stores were closed. The dairies were little 7-11 type shops. Many of them were run by Indian immigrants. No super markets were open in 1987 when we arrived. The pastry shops also were closed. You have to scrabble around if you wanted to go out for dinner on a Sunday evening and only a few places were open during the day. There was no alcohol at all after 11:00 in the evening. Even the bars until 1985 used to close at 9:00 pm. All of that really changed during the period that we were there, so along about 1989-91 greed set in. Super market chains arrived. Big shopping malls began to appear and so people said, there's money to be made on Sunday. All of a sudden life in the major cities changed.

Now, life out in the small towns today is still just as it was in the '80s and as it was in the '50s, but I think that the globalization of communications, the media, easy availability of telephone communications, etc. made an enormous difference in New Zealand because people just became connected. Once they became connected, they wanted to do what everybody else did. They wanted to watch the same movies; they wanted to enjoy the same kind of lifestyles, etc. So today in the small towns and the rural areas, life is much the same as it was even in the '50s. In the cities there is a lot of ferment and change as modern merchandising and the consumer economy have kicked in.

Q: Well, Al when you were there were the New Zealand young people taking their year and gong to Europe and the United States because the Australians were certainly doing this in spades.

LA PORTA: It's called the OE, the overseas experience, indeed that still is a tradition today. They take usually the post university year or they'll take a year off between the first year in college and the second year. The immigration laws in Europe, not only the UK, but also the EU in general allows them to do that. It's a little bit more difficult for the U.S. because we've tightened up so much.

Q: But at the time you were there they were able to come to the United States?

LA PORTA: Yes, except that our visa laws did not easily allow people to work. I remember the case of a daughter of a friend of ours who was quite a wealthy well known businessman. She arrived somewhere on the West Coast and the immigration officer said, where are you going young lady? Well, I'm going to go to Vail or Aspen to work as a ski instructor. Oops, she was sent back.

Q: You were there during '89, '90 and so on when the Soviet Union fell apart and Eastern Europe did and you mentioned that the universities, from what you were saying I gather that there was a strong leftist Marxist element among the faculty and all that. The Marxist god pretty well died at that time.

LA PORTA: They were very unhappy about it because there was a lot of what I would call fashionable leftism, if not arrogance, that was manifested in intellectual circles in New Zealand. It was very interesting that all of a sudden, and not only because of Gorbachev and the great world events, but the Russian embassy even began to become accessible. They decided that they wanted to be loved. They had an ambassador who spoke pretty good English and who had been the secretary of Andre Gromyko, so he had considerable international experience. Gromyko had died. He died suddenly.

Q: He ended up as the president of the Soviet Union.

LA PORTA: Yes, for a short while, but I think the ambassador had joined the foreign ministry by then. He was a nice man, but I think he looked around and said, Glasnost! I better get out and meet people. The Russians began to be friendly where they hadn't been friendly before. Interestingly the Chinese also began to loosen up. All of a sudden the Chinese were giving dinners for Americans or for New Zealanders they were never open to before. Our embassy, in addition to that what we did in Wellington and our consulate general in Auckland, also was responsible for Samoa and several other of the Pacific Islands. Our embassy in Fiji was responsible for Tonga, but we were responsible for Western Samoa and the Cook Islands and Niue, which is a tiny bit of New Zealand protectorate.

Q: Like Guadalcanal and the Solomons...?

LA PORTA: In the Solomons, we had a one man embassy there at that time, to the extent that there was involvement in the Solomons, the lines went more to Australia or Papua New Guinea where we had an embassy. Samoa, the Cook Islands and these other bits of places provided another window to the world or window to another world. We enjoyed our association with Samoa. The ambassador was accredited to Western Samoa. I would go up twice a year and the ambassador would go up twice a year. Other officers would go up once or twice a year and we maintained a reporting program on domestic developments and multilateral affairs. Finally we established a one-officer post there that was responsible to us. It was branch embassy, we called it. As DCM I was responsible for setting up the branch post, dealing with the officer that we had stationed there. Supporting the little post, which had classified fax and telephone communications, was a challenge. We provided most of the material and administrative support for Samoa.

Q: Did it have another name before? The Pacific battles, I never heard, I'm familiar with most, the Pacific war battles. Where is it located?

LA PORTA: I particularly found the cultures of the islands interesting and you had this Maori-Samoa-Polynesian overlap. We became very fond of Hawaii for a lot of those same cultural reasons. The Cook Islands were fascinating. They were little bit of islands that decided to become an offshore financial haven. They got into trouble of course as all such places do when they try to make a quick buck. It was a tight little island with a missionary-based culture, very straight-laced, but there were very interesting things there. In Samoa we had particularly good relations with a couple of the prime ministers. We paid what attention we could. We got the military involved with disaster relief. There was always some disaster going on in the Pacific because of storms or drought or other kinds of bad things. I continued my interest in Pacific Island affairs when I was asked to do some work with the Asian Development Bank to set up economic reform regimes for Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands.

Q: I take it that New Zealand was a friendly place to be, or did anti-Americanism come up from time to time?

LA PORTA: Anti-Americanism was certainly an annoyance, every couple of weeks or so it seemed that someone was raising some kind of issue. Either a controversy brewed up in parliament or something provoked by the government. Prime Minister David Lange, party leader Helen Clark, or another leftist minister wanted to stick it in our eye. That always required a response and public opinion management. Upon my departure the prime minister presented me with an original drawing of a man about to jump out of an open window into an abyss and there was a little kiwi nudging the person on. The person in the window looked a lot like me, but from the back, and it was pretty clear as to who it was. By that time New Zealand had a conservative prime minister, Jim Bolger, and I can tell you it was some frustration even when the government changed and the National Party came into power after the Labor government wore itself out. The election was in 1990 and the National Party came to power; Jim Bolger who in retirement later became ambassador to the United States, became prime minister. We had expectations that now is the chance to change the anti-nuclear policy, to get some other basis of dealing with New Zealand and to find a pragmatic way to bring the relationship back together. It was four years after the battle over the anti-nuclear policy, but the National Party found itself unable to really change the policy. We were able to incrementally resume some aspects of defense cooperation; then by the time of the Gulf War in 1991, the New Zealanders did commit ships and did send several aircraft in conjunction with the Australians. The New Zealand Air Force provided air crews to Australia to fly Australian planes. They sent a telecommunications unit to serve with the United States on the ground in the Gulf. Those were really major developments on the part of the National government and they stepped up to the plate.

Q: Was there opposition from the labor side?

LA PORTA: There was indeed. I think that their calculation was that their opposition wasn't fatal in terms of suspending all relations, so later on when Afghanistan came around, even the Labor government found it in its own interest to make a contribution to the coalition. It took a lot of dialogue with the New Zealanders to try to do things that were pragmatic and reasonable. In terms of the intellectual acumen of the people that we were dealing with, even people with whom we disagreed violently, they were always pretty good. I used to love to go to universities and get into a good wrangle over globalism, what's going on in the world and changes in the Soviet Union. I liked to do a lot of speaking and I did that as well as the Rotary and Lions clubs.

Q: Did CINCPAC make any visits?

LA PORTA: No. One of the consequences of the anti-nuclear policy was that CINCPAC would not come. It took another 15 years for CINCPAC to decide to make a visit to New Zealand. We also had another challenging and interesting area of cooperatioAntarctica. The National Science Foundation and the U.S. Navy programs in Antarctica had support bases in Christchurch on the South Island. Now Antarctica has been totally civilianized and the Navy is no longer involved. I went down to Scott Base in 1988 and had a fascinating experience. We had a lot to do with the policy level of the National Science Foundation and other agencies back here in Washington. As DCM I was the "point person" for the working level contacts with the scientists and the U.S. Navy logistical support people.

Q: Was Greenpeace doing things?

LA PORTA: Oh, yes.

Q: Because that's where the French actually blew up a Greenpeace ship, didn't they?

LA PORTA: Yes, the Rainbow Warrior.

Q: That wasn't during your time was it?

LA PORTA: No, that was earlier. That was in 1984.

Q: What were they doing? Was that a problem for us at all?

LA PORTA: Not really. It was a French problem and it estranged the New Zealanders from the French for a long time. Whether it was Green Peace, Amnesty International, or any of these people, they were rabidly anti-nuclear, so they all sided and aided and abetted the New Zealand leftists. Greenpeace sent annual expeditions to Antarctica and they made a specialty of criticizing the U.S. Navy and anybody else they could find for having contributed to the environmental degradation of Antarctica. All of that was total 100% grandstanding. These people would sneak over to Scott Base at night. They would come into the snack bars and use the U.S. Navy facilities. The Navy's view was not to antagonize them unduly and allowed them to use some facilities, they brought their own trash from their campsites and it was dumped in the U.S. Navy facilities. Tell me who was doing what to whom down there.

Q: What about lambs and wool?

LA PORTA: Love lambs and wool. I still love New Zealand lamb to this day. Meat exports are always and still are an issue. New Zealand farmerI think this goes back to their doggedly independent naturwere fiscally tight, going back to England in the mid 19th Century where most of them came from. They are incredibly efficient farmers, whether its wool or sheep meat, dairy products, or kiwi fruit. New Zealanders invented the commercial cultivation of the Chinese gooseberry known as the kiwi fruit. When they did it, they did it superbly and they also produced other kinds of unique produce.

The green lipped oyster industry began on the South coast of the South Island of New Zealand. Very cold, very deep cultivation of the green lipped mussels which are now a significant export to the United States. They're in our restaurants. New Zealanders are very good at these kinds of things. They're clever, they're efficient, they're scientifically sound, they know how to do it. Of course this compares with the vastly less efficient system of agricultural subsidies and vastly less efficient market systems that we have in the United States, so that the New Zealand meat board and the New Zealand dairy board run circles around even the best United States companies in agricultural marketing. The New Zealanders of course have always had the potential of greatly increasing their meat and dairy exports to the United States except for the limitations that we place on them.

What's happened over the decades since I served in New Zealand is that these restrictions have been loosened considerably although still fairly tight limits still remain on the importation of sheep meat or lamb of various kinds. This is why New Zealand lamb in most restaurants or in the supermarkets costs considerably above the American product. I always used to maintain that the two products were vastly different because what the American lamb producers are selling as leg of lamb comes from essentially a two year old animal. What the New Zealanders are selling as leg of lamb comes from less than a one year old animal. There's no comparison between the two.

Q: Was this a battle that you were having to fight at the embassy?

LA PORTA: Not necessarily a battle. My neighbor was an official of the meat board and we used to find ways to cooperate and collude. Basically we all had to contend with the protectionist forces in the United States. I think that we over the years I think that the State Department and the embassies have done a good, pragmatic job of trying to bring people closer together. If and when we do get around to negotiating a free trade agreement, meat and dairy exports to the United States will be front and center.

Q: How about what we were exporting from the United States. Were there tariffs or controls?

LA PORTA: In terms of U.S. exports?

Q: Were we selling stuff?

LA PORTA: Well, we did butt heads in the beef market in Japan and Korea. The New Zealanders also exported significant quantities of beef, about one-fifth of the quantity of Australian beef that went into the Asian markets. What you had was the U.S. exports of beef butting heads against the Australian exporters of beef in Northern Asian and Southeast Asian markets, too, because McDonald's hamburgers were very much in demand in Bangkok, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The question was: was that product going to come from Australia or from the U.S.? Very little of it came from New Zealand because New Zealand produced higher quality range-fed beef. Those issues still remain because U.S. producers aim at the domestic U.S. market not over there. When they do, they want to export highly specialized high quality products.

Q: Kobe beef?

LA PORTA: Kobe beef to Japan. This farmer's company in Arkansas is now stymied by the U.S. Department of Agriculture because they're prohibited from testing each animal for mad cow disease.

Q: How did you find the media there? I was thinking the British media especially, it is pretty irresponsible compared to ours.

LA PORTA: We always felt they were pretty irresponsible. But they were no more irresponsible, I suppose, than anyone else. I think the media, generally speaking, was inward looking. The anti-nuclear policy was the one delight that they had and international news largely took a back seat in terms of their newspaper reporting. On the other hand this has changed with the globalization of communications, including the internet and television.

I would say that with regard to the media and the quality thereof, I think that the television and to some extent the newspapers improved in the late '80s and in the early '90s because of the globalization of the media and the fact that New Zealanders, whether they liked it or not, were being drawn into the world more fully than they had been before by the worldwide events that they were able to see.

Q: I would imagine that the Gulf War and the hour by hour coverage of it would be a major almost event in the country, wasn't it?

LA PORTA: During the Gulf War, we had a CNN feed and I used to have a good friend who was the special assistant to the prime minister, Jim Bolger. I knew they were having their staff meetings at 8:30 every morning and I would call him about 8:15 and say, Rob, here's the latest thing I'm seeing on CNN on the Gulf War. This is what's going on and you can tell your boss during the morning meeting. It took them a bit to fully wire the New Zealand government offices for global TV, but we were very lucky that we had access to CNN right away and BBC right in our office. I could sit at my desk and watch it all live, talk to my friend on the phone and give him the latest news that they would probably get in another hour or so anyway.

Q: One last question on this unless you think of something else you want to talk about. How about these two cities, Wellington and Auckland on the same Northern island. How did this play for running an embassy?

LA PORTA: We had the consulate general in Auckland and as DCM it was my responsibility. Almost 80% of its functions were American citizens protection, visas and similar consular issues. Auckland was at one end of the Northern island and Wellington at the southern end. I used to go to Auckland frequently and had a good relationship with the consul general and folks there. We used to visit the universities in the north because most of them were either in Wellington or around Auckland or a little bit West of there. We had a consular agent in Christchurch.

Q: That's on the southern island?

LA PORTA: On the South Island. At one time we had a consulate in Christchurch and then it was reduced to a USIS post and then we closed that out and we had a consular agent. The South Island has about 30% of the population of New Zealand the bigger land area than the North Island. It has some of the most wonderful resorts that you'd ever want to visit, like Queenstown, the Milford Trek and Fjordland. A lot of these areas are becoming well known now because of Lord of the Rings.

Q: Movies like Lord of the Rings that shows that magnificent scenery.

LA PORTA: Yes. It truly is magnificent. We enjoyed traveling anywhere in New Zealand, the South island, East Coast, West Coast; all over the North island. It was just a wonderful place just to get out and tramp in the wilderness or go up to a little park area, spend a day or a couple of days. It was really superb and "clean and green as well as nuclear free." My wife also found it professionally rewarding there. She was admitted to the New Zealand bar. She took the New Zealand bar examination and she became a licensed attorney and she worked on some land cases for the Maori, privatization of railway housing and other environmental issues that were very interesting. It got us well into the legal circles as well with the Waitangi Tribunal which is the indigenous peoples court.

Q: Was there any problem or criticism about the white only immigration policy because this is a time that you mentioned before of great movement because of the wars and changing in Asia. You had Indochina heading out and you had Chinese trying to get out of Hong Kong and a lot of this stuff going on.

LA PORTA: The New Zealanders rationalized it in two ways. Number one, their annual intake of immigration from Asia, i.e., non-white, was about 1,200 a year. Later on that went up to maybe 1,700 a year. There was still free immigration from the UK, but there was nil immigration from Europe. I mean you'd have an occasional German or you had someone who had a family member, or an Israeli even who had a family member, in New Zealand. The only other significant source of in migration was from South Africa. People really feared the instability post-apartheid and maybe 50 or 100 South African families came every year.

Q: They weren't trying to fill up their country the way the Australians were essentially trying to build up their country.

LA PORTA: Not at all. I think the New Zealanders felt that in order to maintain the standards of their society and the social system, they could not afford to take in large numbers of migrants annually. They wanted to make sure that the migrants that they took in, except for some humanitarian cases, were largely people who could pay or could contribute in a real way to New Zealand society. That included some Americans. We had American family members of people who were in New Zealand who migrated to New Zealand and had to pass the same tests and occupational requirements as anybody else. It's hard to say whether you look at the New Zealand experience as excessively protective, but maybe for the small size of the country and population it may have been a prudent measure.

On the other hand, the New Zealanders were extremely aggressive and generous in doing humanitarian things with refugee populations elsewhere or humanitarian relief in Timor or anywhere where there were issues. Let's say the humanitarian impulse with New Zealanders to go elsewhere and do good was certainly great in proportion to the size of its population.

Q: Did you by any chance get involved in the case of from our area here there was an American, you know the case I'm referring to. Could you tell what it was?

LA PORTA: I've forgotten the lady's name. This was the case where a woman basically kidnapped her child and spirited her to New Zealand and the child lived with the grandmother and grandfather in Christchurch.

Q: The child's father was alleged by the wife to have been sort of like a pedophile, which was never proved.

LA PORTA: Never proved.

Q: It smacked of family problems.

LA PORTA: His alleged mistreatment of her was never adequately proved in court and she lost on several appeals in the courts here in DC. She just simply spirited the child off and the child lived undercover in Christchurch and then finally the mother joined them in New Zealand and they came out into the open. Basically the child was under the protection of the New Zealand courts. As soon as it became evident what was going on, the New Zealand courts stepped in and, to their credit, they took an absolutely impartial stance and said, we have no interest in this affair except for the interest of the child. New Zealand law, in terms of protection of children's rights, is very clear. I mean there's no wiggle room in it and the court in all of its procedures in Christchurch acted with absolute impeccability. The New Zealanders just did everything right and said this is fundamentally not our problem. If you've got a legal problem in the United States, the legal problem is there, not here. The United States had no grounds on which to request that the child be returned to the United States, etc. and I'm not sure as to the ultimate consequence.

Q: The child is back here now.

LA PORTA: The child is back here and I think is now a teenager.

Q: Did that involve the embassy at all?

LA PORTA: It did only tangentially only because the New Zealand laws and legal procedures were crystal clear. There were no grounds for the U.S. courts or either parent to try to compel the return of the child to the United States, so the question simply didn't arise. We filed consular reports on the case and our consular officer under New Zealand law had controlled access to the child. Their attempt was to shield the child from any kind of public involvement. The whole thing was very discreet. Our consular officer did have complete access to the courts' lawyers who were acting on behalf of the child and we had a very good relationship. It was good testimony to our consular officer, Rob Callard, who did it very well.

Q: In many posts the DCM is the senior personnel officer. Did you take a strong hand in filling Embassy positions as they came open?

LA PORTA: During my four years in Wellington, I had a hand in virtually every personnel action, whether U.S. or FSN (Foreign Service National). It was important at a relatively small post like ours that each officer or staffer pull her/his weight and be compatible with others. We also wanted people who were really motivated to work in New Zealand which was not really a high-profile place.

Q: Well, then is there anything else we should discuss about New Zealand?

LA PORTA: Well, other than it was a superb place to be and it was a great privilege.

Q: Did you have children? I can't remember.

LA PORTA: My daughter was in university back here in the States. My son was with us for the first two years we were there and then he came back to finish his high school here in the U.S. in a boarding school. One of the problems was the mismatch between the British educational system and the U.S. Just the disconnects between what's caught at what levels and the rest of it were just too great, so, we decided to stop fighting this problem and we sent him back to boarding school here. My daughter wanted to be a veterinarian. We looked when she was graduating from the University of Maryland at the possibility of her coming to New Zealand for vet school or to do some pre-vet work. That didn't work either because of the mismatches in curricula.

Q: Well, Al, 1991, whither?

LA PORTA: Whither back to Washington, DC. We remained here for six years and my first job in Washington for over three years was as executive assistant to Elliot Richardson, former attorney general and who had a part-time appointment as the president's special representative for the Philippines.

Q: All right, well, we'll pick it up then.

Today is the 26th of July, 2004. Al, 1991, you came back and what was this all about the special assistant to Elliot Richardson, what was the job and what were you doing?

LA PORTA: There is a little preface to this that relates to kind of the life and times of the Department and where we were in terms of personnel and budgetary constraints at the end of the first Bush administration and then going into the early Clinton administration. For most Foreign Service Officers this was a time of fear and loathing. Fear and loathing of getting prematurely kicked out and career terminations when a lot of friends of ours went out of the Service involuntarily for reasons of time in class starting in 1988 and '89. Through 1995 there were unnaturally high rates of officers leaving the Service. There was a determined effort for budgetary reasons to sever people at the senior level or FS-01 threshold to reshape the profile of the Foreign Service by drastically reducing the number of senior officers as well as officers at the threshold level. It was an effort to force the Foreign Service into a pyramid shape, rather than the kind of boxy shaped organism that it had become. What was happening was that a lot of area specialists and a lot of people that had particular language attributes that many of us felt the Service needed were being kicked out. Assignments were increasingly hard to get so, coming out of New Zealand having been a DCM for four years, I lobbied hard for all kinds of assignments in the Department and elsewhere, anywhere else. Now, sometimes the best is not always the worst and that was true in this case in taking a job as executive assistant to Ambassador Elliot Richardson.

Elliot Richardson was a five time cabinet member, he was the attorney general who resigned because he did not reign in the Watergate prosecutor. Elliot had a part-time presidential appointment as special envoy for the Philippines. How did this come about? Beginning in 1998 the Cory Aquino "peoples power" revolution occurred.

Cory Aquino led the popular movement against Ferdinand Marcos. After nearly a year of demonstrations and turmoil, Marcos was ousted. He came to live in Hawaii where he expired after a decent interval and Cory Aquino established a new non-authoritarian government. In '89 President Bush appointed Elliot Richardson to basically become a cheerleader for Philippine economic reform, to give the Cory Aquino administration some encouragement, to marshal development assistance resources from the World Bank, the ADB, IMF and other organizations, and to help coordinate economic reform and vitalization. Richardson worked in the East Asia bureau. He had an office. He had an executive assistant. My predecessor was John Forbes who as it happened was one of those officers who was being retired for time in class. We had a secretary and basically our job was to work, to the extent that we could, with the Philippine desk, with AID, with the other government agencies, as well as the multinationals and the business community to help bring things together on the economic side. We prepared for donors consultative meetings in which Richardson headed the U.S. delegation and also to stimulate private sector investments to meet some of the Philippines' needs especially in terms of generating new high employment industries. As Elliot's executive assistant, I was his day-to-day link with the bureaucracy, with business organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the U.S.-Philippine Business Council, the Philippine-American Chamber of Commerce in New York, the U.S.-ASEAN Business Council and others, including on the Philippine side, the Makati Business Club, the AMCHAM in the Philippines and several other organizations was to basically work with them in two major respects:

1) to prepare for the international multilateral donor consortium meetings. In this regard the meetings were normally once a year, but there was usually a review meeting on a semi-annual basis, so you had two significant meetings each year at which the economic requirements and progress of the Philippines were assessed.

2) to serve as the high profile leader for business leadership delegations. We led about two missions to the Philippines each year. One mission usually was kind of a policy review mission of the most senior leaders of companies having significant investments there.

Elliot led one review mission each year in which we sat down with a whole range of Philippine government officials and looked them in the eye and said, well, what is it that you're doing or how are you doing or what are you not doing? Then one large mission a year was devoted to bringing the corporate presidents, vice presidents, chairmen of the board and other U.S. business leaders in sectors that we felt were appropriate to the Philippines to meet with the top governmental leaders to visit parts of the country to look at some of the interesting and innovative USAID and other projects.

For almost a solo activity, we never fit neatly into a bureaucratic box in the State Department. Although we were supported by the East Asia bureau, we had free reign to roam widely through the government bureaucracy as well as outside it in order to do what Elliot felt was desirable in terms of getting the Philippine situation some attention and to develop programs that were truly supportive of the Philippines' efforts. This was particularly true in working with the finance minister, central bank governor and other key officials under Cory Aquino. Then that transitioned into working with the reformist administration of President Fidel Ramos who was elected in 1992. I stayed in that job from 1991 through until 1995.

Q: Could we look at the policy and the bureaucratics of Richardson's' position? Presidential envoys have been a useful tool since FDR. Special Envoy's are a newer version. Where did the idea for Richardson's assignment arise? Who was the EAP Assistant Secretary at the time and how did they work together?

LA PORTA: Richardson's position as Special Envoy began when the George H. W. Bush administration wanted to support democratization and reforms in the post-Marcos period. Some viewed his appointment as symbolic (Secretary Baker was the one who proposed him), Elliot took it seriously, especially the two major functions of promoting business and investment and assistance programs to support government reform. So as not to compete on the policy level, Richardson's office was places in the East Asia and Pacific Bureau where, because of his stature and sensitivity, Elliot worked easily with the two assistant secretaries, Dick Solomon and later (under Clinton) Winston Lord. Elliot also worked easily with the DASes for Southeast Asia. Elliot had few turf issues in the bureaucracy but the most ticklish problems were with AID where the seconand thirlevel officials were jealous of his status and resented the White House and 7th floor decisions to accredit Elliot as chief of delegation to World Bank and other meetings on the Philippines. A good statesman, Elliot did not "pull rank" on the AID officials but always made sure he shared the podium with them. No one doubted, however, that Elliot had the clout on the U.S. side.

Q: What was the situation military-wise in the Philippines at that time?

LA PORTA: From the United States point of view it was pretty dire because the Philippines base negotiations, the U.S. team for which was headed by now Deputy Secretary of State Rich Armitage, had collapsed in 1991. There was certainly a bad taste in most peoples' mouths and especially the defense community in Washington against the Philippines. There was certainly a decided disinclination to do anything for the Philippines. Also, Clark Air Force Base had been closed due to the explosion of Mount Pinatubo that basically rendered parts of it unusable and certainly confounded the runways.

Q: When did that happen?

LA PORTA: I've forgotten the exact month, but it was 1990, it might have been the fall of 1990.

Q: Well, anyway, by the time you got there. I mean with negotiations and Clark rendered essentially unusable, our interests started to disappear.

LA PORTA: We were in the process by the end of '91 and certainly into '92 in withdrawing from Subic Bay and from various other bits of real estate that we had had. I guess in terms of the U.S. government approach, this made the economic side all the more important in terms of trying to keep some positive relationships with the Filipinos and to be able to demonstrate that the United States at least was supportive of Philippine democracy and governmental reform.

Q: It's interesting how with the closure of the bases, how the Philippines had disappeared from international view. I mean the American view of the world. It crops up from time to time, but you don't, I mean, this was the beginning of it, or did you feel that way?

LA PORTA: It was hard, especially in the Clinton administration, to get any profile for other than one or two top issues in the Asia arena. In other words, China was the 900 pound gorilla, as we've discussed before, and China drew the attention only because it was there. The second major issue that attracted largely the energies and attention of the Asia bureau was Cambodia and efforts to kind of patch together a settlement and hold elections and to broker the formation of a government among the rightists, the royalists, the communists headed by Huk Sen and a small group of reformists. That was a very difficult situation. The refugee flow out of Cambodia occupied a lot of attention as well. Those were the two main issues. It was indeed hard to get space for the Philippines.

Philosophically, the Philippines was in terms of public attitudes in the United States has been considered to be an American appendage, almost another state. Well, after all, the Philippines were ours once, weren't they? And don't they have a government that looks kind of like ours, and gee whiz we have three to four million Filipinos living in the United States. The perception was that the Philippines are out there, somewhere around Hawaii, and that gave them second tier status, if you will. So, not many people were inclined really to look at the Philippines as a foreign relations problem. I think that while the Philippine situation was complex it was not impossible. Certainly the U.S. business community felt that the Philippines had some distinct advantages and possibilities in offshore manufacturing, oil and gas and to some extent in mining. There was interest in making Philippine exports to the United States grow, whether handicraft items, rattan furniture, wood furniture or other kinds of products. Dried fruit is an interesting commodity and the United States today imports significant quantities of dried fruit from the Philippines.

The Philippines, with its legacy of bad government under Marcos, really cried out for attention in trying to convert it into a viable, functioning democracy something that it had not been since the 1960s and very early 1970s. The difficulties have continued because the Ramos administration was replaced by the administration of an actor, Joseph Estrada, that just opened the way to rampant inefficiency, rip-offs and other depredations. There was also a comeback during that period of the New People's Army, the communist rebel movement, and the resurgence of Islamic terrorism in the Southern Philippines. That very checkered record continued through Estrada's eventual deposition again by "people power" and his replacement by Gloria Arroyo. Her first administration was not terribly strong because it lacked a popular base, then most recently in May there was a hard-fought election which Gloria won by a great margin. There are a lot of law and order problems, corruption and inefficiency issues are rampant in the Philippines today.

Q: What do you do when you've got, I mean we obviously wanted to have strong business ties, keep this place going, close to us and all and yet you've got widespread corruption which means that its not particularly when you've got these other ASEAN countries which have sort of gotten their acts together more.

LA PORTA: I think Cory Aquino started out on a good path because she had assembled a team of technocrats who themselves were above reproach. The finance minister, Jesus Estanislao, was not only considered an incorruptible person, he was an incorruptible person as well as a person of very great expertise. There were other technocrats or accomplished people who were associated with her administration that I think enabled them to make significant progress on corruption, government reform and to some extent on efficiency issues. The real boon in my view was Fidel Ramos when he assumed the presidency. He was able to give a big lift to government performance across the board. During his two terms there was probably the greatest progress made on the kind of the age-old problems that afflicted the Philippines. I like to thinor Elliot Richardson liked to thinthat he contributed in some way to kind of bucking up the Philippines' capacity to do right rather than to do harm or nothing at all.

Q: I would think there would always be the problem of I mean the Filipinos had shut or gotten rid of these bases we had and it was sort of leftover from colonial days, let's be nationalistic and then having somebody like your office with Richardson and all going around and acting like I suppose like a nanny or something wouldn't sit very well.

LA PORTA: Well, I think maybe because the security relationship looked so bad in comparison, we were quite well received on all levels in the Philippines but I think that there were things going on that people didn't notice. For example, USAID had several very innovative area development projects. One of them was in Southern Mindanao at General Santos City, not far from Davao, which I think contributed to significant change to the lives of the people in that area which had been one of the focal points of the Muslim secessionists. At the same time I think that there were things that were being done in terms of organizing industrial parks, upgrading the labor supply and making people more employable. I think that there were issues where the United States contributed in terms of rehabilitation of power plants and upgrading the power supply in many areas. It wasn't all negative. Insofar as the bases were concerned, I think there were two relevant factors: Many people felt at the time, this is in the very late '80s and early '90s, that the United States military doctrine of bases, and how we use them, and what they were and what they were not, was just simply a legacy of the Vietnam War. So we didn't change for two decades, therefore, it was a wake-up call for our Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Pacific Command to rethink how we met our military obligations in Asia and how we conducted our business. That may have been a positive byproduct of the Philippine base imbroglio.

The second factor is that, when it came down to it, the anti-base campaign in the Philippines was largely the product of maybe a maximum of 15% leftist activists in the body politic. There were a handful of extremist senators and one or two fellow-traveling cabinet ministers. There was a clack of journalists and street demonstrations characterized as "rent a mob," but they by no means represented the majority of the population. It was a determined minority within and outside the Philippine government that really was energized to put pressure on the bases. It is notable that some of those people survive today into the Gloria Arroyo's second administration. But a couple of her cabinet members from her first administration, who were very leftist, resigned in disgust with her policies. The record of anti-U.S. feeling is very much uneven.

Q: Did you have, did you feel you had a good working relationship with your counterparts in the Philippines?

LA PORTA: Yes, I think that there's a certain comfortableness about working with Filipinos whether at the grass roots level, whether in Manila or in big business. We had very close relationships in the business community and we found the government to be welcoming of what we were trying to do with them. It was very clearly a case that Richardson wanted to work with the Philippines, recognizing that reform could not be imposed from the outside, but that it had to be something that had to be generated from within. Within that spirit, I think we had a very good working relationship. In a lot of cases the World Bank, the IMF and the ADB, while laboring under the weight of their bureaucracy in their own kind of mindsets, were also by and large cooperative. Richardson, working with the finance minister and others, was able to kind of have an impact and get them on their side as opposed to having a lot of tension between what the World Bank believed, what the Philippines believed and what the IMF believed, etc. It was probably for a number of reasons, the unsatisfactory state of security relationship, lingering tensions over the disposition of Marcos' property, and legal issues relating to Imelda Marcos and her family, that the plus was the economic relationship and what we were able to do on the development side.

Q: Well, during this almost four years, wasn't it?

LA PORTA: Right.

Q: How effective, in the first place how did Elliot Richardson operate?

LA PORTA: Elliot had his full time office in a law firm up on Eye Street and he spent I think about 20% of his total time on Philippines issues during most of the year. He was constantly traveling and at that time was in his mid-70s. He was incredibly hearty and had a tremendous stamina. He always moved at a quick step and always was primed for meetings. He had some personal rules because he traveled so much. One of his rules was always to hit the ground running and then do whatever it was that you scheduled at that time of the day in the place that you'd just flown into and keep going as long as you could and then go to bed. What often comes up in conversations about Elliot was did I see any signs of kind of alcoholism or other things that he might have been afflicted with maybe back in the '70s. I would have to say he was always very measured. We all may have had one or two extra glasses of wine, but by and large, that's all he touched. He certainly showed no signs of what I would call alcoholism. He told me that his slight slurring of speech, especially when he was tired, may have been due to a nervous condition discovered in the early 80's at Harvard University Hospital when he was examined intensively for what might have been a stroke. His brother was head of the hospital's board of visitors at the time and saw that he received every possible test and was treated by the best specialists.

Q: How did he relate to the Philippines?

LA PORTA: He had a funny saying and he used to tell the Filipinos as well, that Philippine politics is next to baseball and football as the greatest spectator sport ever invented. I think that he approached Filipinos with a great deal of equanimity. He was a man who just didn't get ruffled by kind of human frailty or shortcomings or whatnot. It was hard for him to be disappointed and he always maintained an optimistic attitude. That really was the hallmark of his association with the Philippines. He was not unrealistic and I think he could take on the hard issues.

Q: In our bureaucracy were there places that you found easy to work with and ones that were difficult?

LA PORTA: I think that there were not necessarily overly difficult. I think that there were a few disconnects in our relationship with the Philippine desk. The Philippine desk had a group of extremely busy and talented officers, all of them were good friends of mine but they had a short term interest and really didn't want to be bothered with long term economic development or planning for meetings, multilateral conferences or with delegations that were several months out. They had near term necessities to deal with and so we weren't quite as well meshed with them as we might have been. That said, there were no points of substantive disagreement.

The other area was our relationship with USAID. Now, USAID in terms of its bureaucracy and right now I'm talking about the senior bureaucracy in USAID, very much jealously regarded their prerogatives in terms of dealing with multinational organizations, the World Bank, IMF, and the ADB, etc. and they considered themselves the kind of the natural repository of wisdom on economic and development policy. In comes this special representative; not only was he supported by the State Department, but he was from totally outside the government. Not that he would tell them what to do, but he certainly twisted arms and we spent a lot of time with the senior AID leadership on the Asia and Near East bureau level and above trying to get them to see things in a broader context. Particularly it was hard to convince them that they had to give higher priority to economic reform instead of purely development objectives. In other words the United States had a stake in seeing the government reform its tax policy, reform its management practices, promote investment and things like that. It was quite hard to get the AID bureaucracy attuned to those larger concerns.

We had a much more constructive relationship with the AID bureaucracy in Manila than we did in Washington and our ambassadors were supportive perhaps even to a fault. The two ambassadors that we dealt with in Manila at that time were Frank Wisner and John Negroponte, both of whom had a keen sense for economic reform and private sector development, as well as economic and development issues. Their DCMs were entirely supportive. We had a strong relationship and Elliot's efforts were always very welcome by the mission in Manila.

Q: What was your impression of the various international banks, the IMF, Asian Development and all. I mean were they sort of, had their own personalities?

LA PORTA: Well, we found that the World Bank was far easier to deal with than the Asian Development Bank, and the IMF was kind of somewhere in the middle. The World Bank at that time had a very outward-looking, outward-going person, Callisto Madavo, as the vice president who was covering Asia. He was an African development expert and a brilliant guy. He was a good politician and he and Elliot had a good relationship. I think that relationship pretty much pervaded our relationship with the bank staff in terms not only in economic policy, but also in sectoral areas such as investment promotion. The relationship with the ADB, while it wasn't strained, was just kind of diffident in the sense that the ADB bureaucracy then and to some extent now was dense and very hard to penetrate. It was just the culture of that organization, maybe, and I only say this in jest, because they've had a Japanese as president of the bank throughout its history.

The key to the IMF was our and Elliot's relationship with the U.S. executive director's office and it took a little bit of work to get those people on side because their interests were to prosecute whatever issues came before the IMF board. If the Philippines was not on the board agenda that month; it was hard to get their attention. We had to work hard on the staff level making sure that we kept in touch with them, kept them involved in our consultative process, made sure they showed up at meetings, made sure they read the papers and did what we thought they were supposed to do.

I also had a couple of other diversions during this period. I didn't work 100% full time for Elliot Richardson. In 1993 I was asked by EAP, because people in the bureau knew that I had worked closely with the ADB, to pick up another officer had started on an economic review of U.S. relations with the Pacific Islands. That's the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau, part of the Compact of Free Association. It seemed we were always getting ready for a renegotiation of the Compact and this required doing a compendium of all U.S. government programs targeted at the Pacific Islands by agreement or otherwise. That was a big job of work. I had to coordinate with a whole roster of U.S. agencies, including the Department of Interior which had the primary responsibility for implementing the Compact of Free Association. Also, the Education Department, the Justice Department, Labor Department and many other domestic agencies had programs in the Pacific Islands. Basically I was conducting the due diligence review to find out what these agencies were doing in the islands, how much they were spending, how many people they had in these countries, what were the statutory base of their programs and so forth.

I did this work in conjunction with the Pacific Island Affairs Office of the East Asia Bureau. Trading on a lot of the relationships I had with ADB in particular and to some extent with the World Bank, we proceeded top set up donor's consultative organizations for all external assistance to the Pacific Islands countries. This effort was modeled consciously on the consultative group for the Philippines. I went to the ADB and persuaded them that they should lead this consultative process instead of the World Bank. which was the leader of the Philippine group, because the ADB had the larger programs in the Pacific Islands and besides I felt that they needed to exercise greater leadership in the region.

We worked in the bureau to get the ADB to assume this leadership for the Pacific Islands. This policy was really pressed by the East Asia Bureau to diversify the economic burden instead of having the Pacific Islanders look solely at Washington and say what are you going to give me today. We found a way to say no, you have international rights and obligations as well as aid conduits of other donors, especially the Japanese and the Asian Development Bank. I worked on this for about two years in addition to what I was doing on the Philippines.

Q: I went out one time sort of for USIA training ground to Micronesia. Just looking around there, you realize there's nothing there. It looked like a place where the whole economy was based on receiving enough money so they could lead a rather, I have to say indolent life. The fishing industry had gone. The Japanese had taken that over and outside of I mean it seems like there were pickup trucks and six packs of beer. It seemed to be the...

LA PORTA: And Spam.

Q: And Spam. Yes. I mean and I'm not sure that there really was anything other than to get them all to get out in their outrigger canoes and learn to fish again or something.

LA PORTA: This dependence mentality was a very big one and also had to do with our relations with Guam as well as Hawaii. We did not have an easy relationship with the Marshall Islands because of the Kwajalein missile range and that required a certain amount of tending of the relationship on the economic side because it was a big absorber of employment and there were obvious economic and social benefits to that for the Marshall Islands. At the same time, there were opportunities in the fishing industry. In fact tuna fishing and tuna processing in the Marshall Islands warranted attention and was able to expand. It became very lucrative in terms of shipping fish, tuna by air to Japan.

In Micronesia there were projects developed to grow flowers for the Japanese market and also to grow vegetables and melons and things for export. Micronesia was the hardest case I think in terms of any of the three island groups because there was just no real resource base or other attributes other than reef scuba diving that they could really exploit. They had a lot of sunken vessels from World War II that were great favorites for divers.

Q: Keep in mind that Truk diving...

LA PORTA: Yes. Truk and Chuuk. There were those islands. On the other hand it was necessary really to work economically to bring these countries into the Pacific mainstream in terms of how they managed even their small economies. It was important that there were obligations that the multilateral institutions, banks and others did impose on them, that they had to live up to, and that there were reform and other requirements that they had to pay attention to just to be citizens in the Pacific arena. The feeling of the State Department and this was not universally shared in the U.S. government and was sometimes outwardly opposed by the Interior Department. The tendency was to treat the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau as adjuncts of the United States as opposed to ostensibly sovereign states that had to perform and had certain obligations. The Interior Department would have preferred to just keep them as satraps, force feed them with all the aid that the United States could supply and everybody would live happily ever after. These mini-states would continue their indolent ways and suck up international resources and the largess of the U.S. government. However, the State Department and our special negotiators for the Compact negotiations certainly did not feel that that was the wave of the future.

I think progress has been made. We trained economic planners. We've trained diplomats from these island countries. They have been standing taller and more on their own feet in the last decade and a half. I think that they are able to function more independently and I think it's good to have others share their economic oversight and development programs.

Q: You kept up some of this Pacific Islands orientation until what, '95 or '96?

LA PORTA: '95 and there were two other things going on. While I was doing the Philippines and the Pacific Island program, I had two other things that I was doing unofficially. One concerned AFSA. The American Foreign Service Association and the other concerned the Senior Foreign Service Association (SFSA). At the beginning of the Clinton administration I was asked to become one of the contributors to something called "State 2000" which was an effort to write the Department's management reform agenda for the Clinton administration. When I came back to Washington in 1991 I was asked to join a team that was headed by Lannon Walker and included people like George Moose and Bill De Pree whom I had worked for in Management Operations and quite a number of others to write the report on how to reorganize foreign relations in the Clinton administration.

My particular contributions were in the final report chapters that I wrote on the disposition of our posts worldwide which was a carryover from work that I had done in the office of Management Operations. There was also a section devoted to how to provide logistical support to posts overseas, essentially moving toward a free market basis for doing that. These two reform issues formed a body of the final report which was about 300 pages; we also published a shorter version of about 100 pages. I worked with old friends in the administrative apparatus of the Department to put together these two parts of the larger study.

Q: With AFSA, sometimes the politics of AFSA can get really nasty as in I guess any professional organization. How was it during the time you were involved?

LA PORTA: I think they were not terribly good and it was one of the reasons I became involved in AFSA. The Senior Foreign Service Association had a lot to do with the discomfort that was being felt in AFSA in the early to mid '90s. The Senior Foreign Service Association was headed by Lannon Walker, never a person to hide his light under a bushel. I was asked to join that group. It was not really an organization, although we had memberships and we did pay dues, but we didn't have a lot of meetings. Most of it was "guilt by association" activity where we got coalitions of officers interested in a personnel or management issue to go and lobby. I signed on as executive secretary. Among other things we lobbied against the very high level of time in class (TIC) expulsions from the Foreign Service. We lobbied for the retention of essential language skills by using the powers under the Foreign Service Act and lengthening ticks or recalling people to active duty. We were witnessing a hemorrhaging of skills during that period that were going to have serious consequences downstream and we know what they are now. We also lobbied on the Hill for increasing Department budgetary resources because we saw that the Service was shriveling and that there would be important personnel shortfalls. The argument that Bill Harrop has used on hollowing out of the Foreign Service is one that is now being fulfilled.

Q: This is Bush I and the Clinton administration were not good in a way for the Foreign Service from the first, I mean resources. You had, correct me if I'm wrong, but you had Secretaries of State like James Baker, Madeleine Albright, and Warren Christopher who took next to no interest in management which meant that the budget people could nibble away at the structure.

LA PORTA: Well, I think more than that that there was a willful desire to not only reduce the size of the Foreign Service, but to reduce the size of the State Department. I think as we may have discussed, one of the consequences of James Baker's actions vis-ï¿½-vis the fall of the Soviet Union was to decree that the additional resources needed to open posts and to provide staff in the "Stans" and in Eastern Europe were to be taken from within the Department's resources. That was a very serious measure. Those of us in Management knew that it couldn't be done, shouldn't be done and yet that was the decision from the top. The last two budgets of the Bush administration were not at all favorable to the Department, because they were below maintenance of current levels. If you factor a budget level and then calculate cost of inflation, cost of living increases, that's your minimum maintenance level. In other words you have no more resources to basically implement new programs or do anything different with. By recollection, the last two budgets of the Bush I administration were below the minimum maintenance level. There were reductions in real terms.

This was carried over into the Clinton administration where, in addition to the disinclination to really address the systemic problems of how relations were done and the relative responsibilities among agencies and bodies like the National Security Council. There was not only a disinclination to address how to reform the shared administrative support from other agencies, and to indeed look at the personnel system except to reduce it. This a decade later had disastrous consequences so that by the end of the '90s we had over 3,000 positions in staff and officer level positions that the Foreign Service could not fill. It was the atrophication of the Foreign Service that I think that the senior officer group and then later AFSA really wheeled into high gear on.

At that time also there was the so-called Strategic Management Initiative. While perhaps born of a good idea under Warren Christopher in terms of figuring out how to do more with less in strained budgetary circumstances. The Strategic Management Initiative was billed as something that it clearly was not. It was billed as an attempt to find new ways to do our business and to be creative, yet nothing, but nothing resulted from that except more pain and more reductions. Needless to say those of us who were working in the trenches of Department reform were not terribly happy.

Q: It was not a golden period.

LA PORTA: It was not a golden period and the darkest day came in 1995 with the stoppage of government. At that time I was in AFSA. I was the State vice president for AFSA, sitting in my office in Main State through the entire forced layoff of government workers, taking calls from people around the world saying what am I going to do? How am I going to pay my bills? I need to send somebody to the hospital, how can I do that? The Department's bureaucracy was not functioning. They could not maintain essential services for Department employees overseas. No matter what they said, there was in fact resistance on the part of the Department to do anything even for the life and limb of its own employees. That was truly a depressing situation. In my 38 years of State and 44 years of public service, it was certainly the darkest time of my career.

Q: There was no sort of running around and let's go here. It sounds kind of dog in the manageress something.

LA PORTA: Well, it was not only dog in the manger, it was mean spirited. In other words, it was people were being told, no, you cannot come to work. No, you should not do anything beyond matters that directly affect the national security of the United States. This was what all public service employees of the Department of State were told and this was not only an abdication of leadership, but it was an abdication of public responsibility in every respect. I'm sorry, I get carried away.

Q: Well, no, I think this is very important because I was consul general in Naples back in an early one of these. It didn't happen, but it's like being the captain of a ship at sea and they say, oh, shut down the engines and just sit there. There must have been an awful lot of people particularly at overseas posts saying screw you as far as the thing and taking care of the matters at hand, including distressed Americans and everything else.

LA PORTA: No question. People would call in: I have a kid that has to get on a plane to go back to school, what do I do? I have orders for medical leave to get something attended to, can I travel, why can't I travel? Because the admin officer was basically told no unless it affected the national security of the United States, we wouldn't do it. So, you know, short of invasion, rebellion and acts of terrorism, the bureaucracy was told to shut down.

Q: It lasted for how long?

LA PORTA: Well, it lasted for a total of 15 days in its totality if you factor in the weekends, but it was essentially a full pay period. The way it impacted it started in the middle of a pay period and went over to the next pay period. Even the financial wheels weren't cranking in order to provide resources or even to simply pay the bills. We had people calling up the Department, they were suppliers of X, Y and Z, should we move this shipment or why can't we move this shipment? You didn't pay me for sending some kind of important supplies from point A to point B. What do we do? My household effects are sitting somewhere and I don't know where they are and I have no information or they're on a boat. Everything just was appalling.

One of the things that I did before I assumed the State vice presidency in AFSA in 1995 was as part of the Senior Foreign Service Association to forge a relationship with the Senior Executives Association throughout the government. I started going to their meetings. These are senior officer associations from all of the civilian agencies, including DOD, and it also included the American Public Employees Institute and many other organizations of public employees. The pro-employee movement was just beginning to develop at that time. I thought it was worth doing because the climate in terms of budget and personnel and us getting beat up on in the Department was becoming so bad. I said I'd better go out and find out what's happening in other agencies. Fortunately, let me say, that the fact that I worked for Elliot Richardson and worked alone basically in terms of supporting him, I had flexibility in my own schedule to be able to do these things. Elliot was also a founder of the Center for Excellence in Public Service, so he had a supportive interest in my reform work.

Q: I think for somebody looking at this you might describe what was behind the shutdown of the government. It wasn't just State Department; it was the whole government.

LA PORTA: I think that at the high political level it was the Republican controlled Congress and the Democratic executive coming to a not only stalemate, but loggerheads over the budget. The Clinton administration decided, well, if the Congress was not going to deal in terms of budget compromise and issues such as debt and taxes, then Clinton was going to pin it on the Congress. Of course it totally backfired because people looked around domestically and said, gee whiz, my park is closed. I can't go to the park today or I have reservations to go to Yellowstone. Why can't I go to Yellowstone? Essential services like the Park Police were being curtailed, for example.

Q: I can't get a passport.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. Yes. By the way I'd already paid the money to go to Italy and that trip was lost. It is whether you consider it a blatant miscalculation by the political forces or whether, as I do, considered it an act of mean spiritedness on the part of both the executive branch and the Congress toward public service.

Q: They were trying to, you have this Republican, the Republicans had control over the House and the Senate the first time in a long time and they had had this anti-government feeling.

LA PORTA: Government running against the government.

Q: Yes, running against the government by so-called 'Contract for Americans."

LA PORTA: Newt Gingrich.

Q: I mean there was a certain amount of glee in doing this, like we'll show them.

LA PORTA: Absolutely.

Q: Of course the public did not respond with the same amount of glee. I mean it showed the politicians on both sides who came out with bloody noses, I think.

LA PORTA: I think that the demoralization of the public service was extremely serious. To crawl back and to get a positive profile for not only the Foreign Service, but also for the Department and public service as a whole, in subsequent years really preoccupied much of the time that I spent with AFSA. I'll come back to that again, but I do want to say a couple of other things that I think were important about the Department during this period.

The Undersecretary for Management, Dick Moose, who had been a Foreign Service Officer, was I thought the person who single-handedly did the most damage to the Department and to the Foreign Service through his A) abject neglect of the Department's interest, B) his lack of heed to the foreign relations priorities and interests of the United States, and C) his own arrogance in terms of what I felt was pursuing the destruction of the institution that we believed in. Dick Moose was a person who would not listen, did not understand the consequences of his actions in being party to this kind of mindless budget cutting and rape and reduction that he was about. There were no reasoned arguments that could penetrate him. I felt that not so much myself, there's no fear or no ego in this at all, but in terms of people who are were more senior and more experienced than I saying, "Dick, you don't know what you're doing. This will have serious consequences."

The Department at that time also sold itself to the other agencies just simply in the hope of getting more budgetary resources out of them, i.e., the CIA or whomever. We paid for it dearly so that we had big parts of the infrastructure like the communications that the Department did not own and control anymore. We had systems that became wildly divergent from the DOD and the CIA. One of the big issues that I dealt with under the Reinventing Government project in the State Department was trying to point the way to establishing a common messaging system among the foreign affairs agencies. We got nowhere of course because Moose and his minions were going off in all kinds of other tangents.

The other part that I felt very strongly about is that, whether we like to say it or not, the Foreign Service Officers as well as the Civil Service officers who were running the bureaucracy of M (and that includes personnel, FMP, the procurement division, etc.) all of which under Moose and his successors became bigger and bigger under the so-called Strategic Management Initiative. FBO was another one. Supply and Transportation another one. All of them absorbed large amounts of contractors. The Department was dumping its scarce resources into those areas with no gain in service or efficiency, while severing the expertise of the Foreign Service. That's a good soapbox on which to end, now that I'm wound up.

Q: All right. One more question before we leave this, we might as well do it now if we could. Did you get involved in quite controversial, the Senior Officer Association went head to head on the ambassador to Switzerland? Were you in that?

LA PORTA: Yes and no. I personally tried to stay away from that. There were a number of our colleagues who felt that opposing these very high profile ambassadorial appointments that went to some egregious political appointees were a way to make a statement for the Foreign Service. I respectfully demurred from that position, only because when you take on almost unwinnable cases you get into challenging presidential prerogatives. It's the president's prerogative to appoint ambassadors. Okay, it's a proposition you can't disagree with, so you have a no win argument and one in the end that does a lot of violence to the Foreign Service by drawing criticism on the political level where we need, well we don't need those arguments. In other words you can make a statement and be principled, but lobbying, writing op-ed pieces, going around to TV stations, and so forth, in the long term are counterproductive. You can be principled, but I think that active opposition costs more than what its worth. Instead we should put our energies into changing the system.

Q: We just finished talking about your time with AFSA and the Senior Officers group. Where are we going to pick it up when we come back?

LA PORTA: I think we'll pick up in 1995 when I started full time as State vice president for AFSA.

Q: All right, we'll do that.

Today is the 2nd of August, 2004. You've mentioned AFSA from time to time. Many reader's will be uninformed about AFSA, its history and that being President and Vice President are two year "assignments." Could you give a brief sketch of AFSA and its relationship to State?

LA PORTA: The American foreign Service Association, or AFSA, is both a professional association and a labor union. AFSA is supposed to advance better ways the Foreign Service can perform as well as represent the rank-and-file of the foreign affairs agencies (State, USAID, FCS, FAS) to respective agency management. AFSA today has about 13,000 active duty members. Among other things, AFSA has bargaining rights on personnel operations and the assignment system, promotions and working conditions. AFSA also represents employees in discipline cases, disputes and legal cases.

Q: How did you find the politics of AFSA?

LA PORTA: I thought the politics of AFSA were always a bit strange, not solely derived from the fact that it has a dual function. I think that AFSA has kind of had so many peaks and valleys over the long span of years, that it has been very hard, given the nature of our business, to develop consistent leadership. The most long-lived leader that AFSA has had is Tex Harris and I will have to say that Tex and I did differ on many things. I think one of the problems is that AFSA for a long time was synonymous with Tex Harris and vice versa, so that it was very difficult to get daylight between the two and to have any sense of corporate governance. On the other hand, I will have to say that a number of retirees have contributed enormously to the stability and constancy and consistency of AFSA over the years. For example, Bill Harrop, Tom Boyatt, Bill De Pree, Gil Sheinbaum and others who have taken the time in retirement to really work with AFSA on a consistent basis.

I think one of the reasons why I became active in AFSA in 1991 and '92 was because the Senior Foreign Service Association was the "State 2000" project. I and others felt a lot of dissatisfaction lack of grit and failure of AFSA to address some of the issues that we felt needed addressing, for example, the very important area of work force planning.

It was becoming apparent, or it had already become apparent, that with the exercise of the TIC method of downsizing the Foreign Service at the senior and upper mid-grade levels, combined with severe budget reductions, was gong to create real problems. Therefore, many of us felt the need to pressure the Department to come forward with a plan to show us how they were going to get the work done. That's the nub of it. We thought that AFSA should have a greater role and begin to make demands on the Department in that respect.

Q: Did you come in, I mean did you come in with a group, almost a mandate a program?

LA PORTA: Not at all. There was one seat on AFSA's State standing committee that was reserved for a Senior Foreign Service Association representative. When I came back in '91 and in '92 became active with the senior group, I then took the seat sometime in '92. I sat on the State standing committee as a member before running for election in 1994. I'd had a good couple of years working in the State standing committee and that was useful because it imported the senior concerns, but also it incorporated the intelligence that we were able to glean from management, from the DG's office, from our various associations in the bureau and were able to contribute that kind of information from the old girl and boy network to the State standing committee.

Q: You were there from '95 to '97?

LA PORTA: Right, until the fall of '97. In the elections of '95 we formed a slate of people, the so-called reform slate, and we ran for office and I ran successfully for State vice president. We won the State Department slate. I chopped fulltime to become AFSA representative in 1995 and that lasted for a little over two years.

Q: For background, isn't it true that certain AFSA positions, such as VP, are recognized as (two-year) assignments. One's sole responsibility is to the AFSA job. It is not, in addition to a regular assignment?

LA PORTA: When taking a job as an AFSA vice president or president, it is treated as a regular assignment and the Department continues regular salaries and benefits. However, you do not compete for promotion (there is no EER) and your time in class (TIC) calculation. In short, taking an AFSA position is "time out" from the regular competitive system.

Q: When you came onboard, was there a feeling that AFSA was fighting against an almost active opposition on the part of the director general and Secretary of State or was there a feeling that the Secretary of State really didn't, was almost a non-player?

LA PORTA: To say that Warren Christopher was a non-player is exaggeration. I don't think the man ever understood what the employee organizations were about or basically what was going on in the management sphere and the personnel area in particular. That was only one of the problems. I think that the fact that you had an Undersecretary for Management, Dick Moose, who through his various decisions was ruining the core capabilities of the Foreign Service, the abilities of the Foreign Service to meet these still increasing demands with fewer and fewer resources was a matter of urgent concern for those of us in the Service who understood what was going on. You have to admit, and here is another one of the problems of Foreign Service organizations, 80% of Foreign Service employees are basically unaware of or inert to what goes on in the management sphere. It only took a few of us who were conversant with management issues to gain attention to those and to really press them in various fora.

Let me also say that the nature of the labor management agreement with the Department provides for fairly limited employee bargaining rights. In other words, AFSA has no rights over who or how many people the Department hires. If the Department is nice they will give us consultative rights on things like the examination process, employee intake or how things were done in that area. It is only once people become employees does AFSA have any rights regarding working conditions and salaries, but then we don't have anything to say about the budget, except in an hortatory sense, and over the nature and shape of the Service in terms of its size, composition and how people are promoted. I think the one area where we do have well entrenched rights is in the area of promotions but most Foreign Service Officers don't pay any attention to the precepts for promotion, but we in AFSA sure do because that's a very bread-and-butter thing that affects every officer. It's possible to get real change through the annual negotiations over the precepts for the promotion panels.

There are other areas that AFSA is involved with that are also important, obviously the grievance process and the fact is that AFSA has an incredibly capable legal staff and a superb general counsel, Sharon Papp. There's a real effort there to do right by employees who are aggrieved in one sense or another, whether its pay or other kinds of conditions or disciplinary action or just silly administrative rules. I think that during the period that I was in AFSA we really pressed forward on a lot of these legal issues because and they're not easily resolved and many of them are ignored by the Department. The Department has an appalling record of not implementing grievance decisions and those things are found in the grievance process to be faulty policy, much less paying Department employees what they're due. There's no such thing as the Prompt Payment Act for Foreign Service employees.

Q: While you're on the grievance side, one of the things that catches a lot of our attention talking about the group that doesn't pay an awful lot of attention to what happens. Not so much about people who are unjustly treated by the system, but once they start complaining seem to be able to hang on for decades particularly if they can file a racial bias or gender bias or something like that. Is that a thing that you could look at? I mean, a person who grieves is not necessarily right.

LA PORTA: You're exactly right and there are two things that are relevant in this respect. Number one, EEO grievances very seldom come through the AFSA channel for legal action.

Q: Equal...

LA PORTA: Equal Employment Opportunity cases, things that allege sexual, gender, religious or other kinds of discrimination, more often than not are brought by employees with attorneys who specialize in those areas. They very often did not come to AFSA first or at all. Because that part of employment law seemed to be so specialized, everybody assumed that AFSA was behind these things when in fact they were not. The second aspect was one of the changes we made in the mid-'90s in AFSA's approach to grievances in that we accepted the principle that there should be limitations on how long employees could grieve and putting some other limitations on employee rights. We agreed with the principle that undue manipulation of the process was unwise. On the other hand, we didn't want to severely limit the rights of employees who grieve so that they would be left without a means of regress in justifiable cases.

At the same time a countervailing issue was the Department's increased use of administrative sanctions to penalize an employee. For example, because of security violations and the increased attention given to high profile cases in this area, the Department has unjustly removed the security clearances of people without due process. The Department claims that as an administrative right, but it hasn't been tested in court. For example, there are a number of cases that I'm aware of, and I'm sure the AFSA general counsel could give you many more cases, where an employee who has committed an administrative infraction is penalized either by a formal reprimand, relief from duty for a certain period of time, or has letters placed in his or her files, may be penalized in the promotion boards for lax security awareness.

To go one better, the Department then removes their security clearances for things that are not related to their basic fitness to serve as Foreign Service personnel. In other words, factors that do not go to their reliability in the security sense can affect their security clearance status. The Department has used that mechanism in order to levy a double penalty on individuals it just wants to get rid of, showing that they can be tough and are not going to let people get away with anything. I've seen a number of cases or an increasing number of cases since the mid 1990s where that kind of punitive administrative punishment has been taken against people that lies outside the grievance process. The impetus for this high-handed action by management to some extent stems from criticism from the Congress (a few members and some staffers) who believe that the Department lets its employees off with light punishment for administrative infractions. So Department administrators want to prove their manhood, so to speak.

Q: During this time '95 to '97 approximately when you were there, what were the issues that concerned you in AFSA in particular?

LA PORTA: We discussed the shut down of the federal government and how employees were treated, and how their issues were not dealt with was a main concern. The second thing was work force planning and trying to press the Department, which we're still doing today through legislation, to come forward to say how they are going to use their people. Are your budget resources in the right place? Are personnel doing the right things? Is the work force the correct size? There was a culmination in the early to mid '90s of initiatives under the so-called Strategic Management Initiative that were aimed at rectifying some of these problems.

A third concern of ours in AFSA during this period, and frankly it was one of the things that I personally felt strongly about, was what I call the "Department of Silly Rules." There is so much self-management and self-administration in the Department that are required by archaic measures that the Department itself either takes no action to mitigate or simply compounds because it is a bureaucracy and people have to do things. For example, we had humongous arguments about the size requirements for family housing overseas. Guidelines were promulgated in the mid '80s, well, were they suitable for the mid '90s? Employees had different and changing demands, and because of the inability to fill postings at hardship posts, we felt the Department needed to take new approaches in order to provide some incentives. This process is going on today as well. We also tried in the "silly rules" area to get parts of the Department to properly implement travel regulations to make sure employees had the option to take an overnight stay where they're traveling halfway around the world. Bureau policies were often inconsistent with pro-employee rules in order to save money or just to show they were tough.

Likewise in the silly rules department, the policy on premium travel, business class travel or even first class travel, the CIA has a very liberal policy. When you're at post all the CIA employees sit in the front of the plane and all the Foreign Service employees get on in the back of the plane. The Department simply has to have a more rational application of some of the rules in order to dignify what employees really do. The only thing that I can say is that it's somewhat encouraging that current Secretary of State Colin Powell has taken a fairly firm stand to try to eliminate a lot of those kinds of irritants.

Q: Did you get involved with the problem of I don't know what you want to call it, significant others? In other words, more and more Americans around the world have partners either male or female depending what, who accompany them, but they're not married or they can't get married. Did this come up?

LA PORTA: It did indeed and we spent a lot of time in the State Standing Committee going back to the early '90s on these issues, and of course there's the well known organization GLIFAA, the Gays and Lesbians in the Foreign Affairs Agencies. We had a reasonably good working relationship with them. We had openly gay members on the State Standing Committee. We worked things out. The attitude we took as far as the State Department was concerneand I think AFSA did in all the foreign affairs agenciewas that it's largely a matter of timing, how things are done and whether you have kind of the right conditions to get a change in the regulations or policies, for example, to allow partners to be issued identification badges at post. Today that's commonplace. Back in the mid '90s it was just beginning. Also it took time to really sensitize people in the Department that unmarried partners should be eligible for family employment programs. Over time that's been done. Also, there were some issues about access to facilities, and it just takes time. We frankly saw no benefit in going overtly and in a great public way to make a great outcry about these kinds of issues because of the timing. We thought it was probably better to get more measured agreement on a lot of these issues.

Q: Well, Congress had come down on you hard if you got too far out in front.

LA PORTA: We were dealing with Jesse Helms.

Q: Yes, but even under the idea of issuing a diplomatic passport to somebody who is not married to a diplomat could be a problem.

LA PORTA: Yes, but yet we did propose ways of doing that and for people to be able to show that they had the kind of relationship, etc. in terms of a length of a relationship. The fact that they had property in common, the fact that they had bank accounts in common and other things, we were able to demonstrate there were some grounds for taking positive action. As you pointed out, this applied not only to people in homosexual relationships, but people in heterosexual relationships.

Q: Oh, absolutely.

LA PORTA: There were people who had heterosexual relationships that did not want them formalized for various reasons. So, you have a minority of a minority in a sense and there were people who used to come to AFSA and say, no, we don't agree that partners should receive X, Y, Z benefits because this would jeopardize their own relationships, mainly tax and financial. People who didn't want those benefits did not want to be forced into some kind of formal relationship they might not have wanted.

Q: Were you able to ever address this, I'm not even sure if was AFSA's business, but the balance between security and getting the job done overseas?

LA PORTA: Oh, absolutely. Security was a major concern in many respects, not in the least because we represented security officers, security technicians and other DS (Diplomatic Security) employees. We had a number of now famous labor management suits against the Department for overtime pay, for DS personnel assigned to VIP or the Secretary's personal details. There's some discrimination in how the overtime rules were applied by DS, the Diplomatic Security bureau, and FMP, the Financial Management Bureau was heedless of federal compensation practices. There were also cases where security technicians basically wanted salaries and assignment procedures more congruent with their officer colleagues in the DS bureau. To the extent we had influence in the security area it was largely our ability to work with some of the right minded people in DS to work things out. There was also a committee in DS that informally represented a group of security agents and we worked constructively with them.

Q: There's another aspect to this and that is making an embassy secure often means its almost hermetically sealed and instead of being in Patagonia in a sealed thing you might as well be back in Washington. I would think the union is always looking after the welfare of its people, but at the same time, we understand what we're trying to accomplish, it means to mix and mingle and get out there.

LA PORTA: At the time of the African embassy bombings, for example, AFSA had a strong record of supporting more effective security arrangements for employees. From the AFSA board perspective we always took the professional position, as you just stated, that we can do this in light of the obligations that we're out there to perform. In other words the security measures, however Draconian, should not totally inhibit the ability of people to conduct their basic jobs. This was a fine line. In various ways in congressional testimony and information that we supplied to the Hill on the implementation of security measures going back to the Inman legislation of the mid 1980s, we tried to distinguish between the foreign relations obligations and mindless security measures.

On the other hand, we did see a great need and AFSA still does make a lot of noise on the Hill, on the need for security in construction in order to make our embassies more physically secure in appropriate ways, to build new buildings, to get our people into better housing and otherwise to make sure that in cases where there are security dangers people are provided with transportation or have other options available to them. Local guard service overseas is very important and at a number of posts we had to go to the Department and say, we know you have a problem in providing guard service at X post, you're providing it for certain classes of people, but not others and these people are also at risk, therefore, you the Department have an obligation to straighten this out. In the time of budgetary stringency when things were getting narrower and narrower in terms of budget tolerances it's very hard to get improvements like that for the employees.

Q: You addressed it before, but during this time you were doing this, was there sort of a head to head clash with Dick Moose on who was head of the administration?

LA PORTA: There were head to head clashes on so many things, mainly dealing with assignments, promotions and staffing levels. It was fairly acrimonious. He had some good assistants, executive assistants in his office whom we tried to work with and we worked with them successfully as we could. I think that there was also a bias because the various director generals are always captives of the bureaucracies in the personnel bureau. Personnel is basically controlled by Civil Service people, not Foreign Service people, because the Foreign Service people are transitory and don't consider a job in PER (now HR) to be career-enhancing. The best you could get was a Foreign Service Officer like Ralph Frank who was Deputy Director General for the Foreign Service personnel system. He had been head of Career Management and Assignments and tried to improve conditions from within. He tried to work constructively when he was in Dick Moose's office as well. Again, you have to work with people, but I think there is not only an anti-employee organization bias in personnel, but I think there's a basic anti-employee bias.

Let me also say in this regard that the difference between the Foreign Service and Civil Service is the mindset. With some wonderful exceptions, CS officers have a 9-to-5 mentality and are devoted to doing their jobs within prescribed limitin other words, they work to their job descriptions. Foreign Service officers generally speaking are lateral thinkers, seek to be creative, do their jobs without reference to time and personal convenience, and are ambitious, perhaps to a fault as some would say.

Q: Did you feel that you were on the, watching a clash of systems, essentially saying the civil service which more or less controlled most of the machinery you were interested in and the Foreign Service, I mean the civil servant and the average civil servant and the average Foreign Service Officer or employee really kind of have different approaches.

LA PORTA: Well, I wouldn't want to overdraw this because I know good friends who have been Civil Service managers over the long span of years who are as frustrated as anybody in the Foreign Service with the failure of the system to change, whether it's a matter of organizational management, financial management or personnel management. I think that where the rub comes in terms of the mindset in State Department management is that the people operating the system, whether computers, finance, personnel, whatever, the Civil Service employees are there for very long spans of years. So, there's a disinclination to change. There's a disinclination to try to do something else when its so easy and convention to continue on doing what you're doing.

On the other hand, Foreign Service people tend to be much more impatient with the system, as the legions of Foreign Service management studies have shown essentially since the '60s, that change is needed but there's a distinct unwillingness to embrace that kind of change. This is what I also learned from my work with the Senior Executives Association, SEA, which felt as senior leaders of the Civil Service that there was a decided reluctance of the corporate bureaucracy to change. They were as frustrated as we were in the State Department where you had a very small group of activists constantly trying to move the Department to improve things, improve the allocation of resources or adopt different procedures, etc. I think its probably as much attributable more to the bureaucratic mindset and the antipathy toward change. There were indeed sharp words exchanged between Civil Service representatives and Foreign Service representatives, things were not always gentle in terms of making reciprocal allegations.

Q: During the Clinton administration, Vice president Al Gore was given the task of reinventing government which essentially was try to make things work better. Was this at all, did this have any impact or not?

LA PORTA: It was certainly an interesting intellectual exercise, but it had no impact whatsoever as far as what I could discern. Reinventing Government was a lot of good ideas and certainly the jargon and the intent and all of that was extremely stimulating. Gore did make some waves and there were some changes that are even now just being seen, for example, in the way DOD, the Defense Department, runs its procurement policy, changes that it has gotten in its personnel policy and more recently the implementation of new rules for the Senior Executive Service. Here's a real irony, the Senior Executive Service adopting most of the practices that we follow for promotion and assignment and upward movement in the Senior Foreign Service. We always knew that was true, it's just now come to pass with the new rules that were implemented in January of 2004.

The Al Gore exercise and everybody knew that it was largely public relations eyewash, but it had a couple of benefits. Number one, it tended to bring government organizations together. Number two, it tried to redress the negative impact of the government shutdown after 1995. In other words, they tried to give a little bit more dignity and recognition to government officials and it did establish certain programs to reward excellence in organizations as well as in individuals. In the Department the Reinventing Government initiative was a logical outgrowth of the Strategic Management Initiative. A hundred or so employees put a lot of effort into what was called the SMI, Strategic Management Initiative at the beginning of the Clinton administration to try to get changes in the Department's way of doing business that could be implemented within the Department's' own area of responsibility as opposed to seeking dramatic new legislation or wholesale changes in the way the foreign policy structure operated. This was a pale substitute for implementing things that we recommended in "State 2000" and that a number of other independent commissions like the Rudman Commission later on recommended.

Now, the SMI was largely unrequited. The work didn't go anywhere. A lot of people spent a lot of time in committees to identify problems and to come up with worthwhile solutions, but certainly any benefits were clearly at the margin. Reinventing Government was the same sort. Each agency under the Gore rules had to have an internal process to reinvent itself. The Department established a reinvention working group, headed by Bob Pearson who is now the Director General of the Foreign Service. I was asked to become a deputy and there was one other deputy. We took up certain subjects in administrative management, personnel and communications field and we came up with some concrete action recommendations. For example, in communications, we urged that the Department adopt the Department of Defense's DMS, the Defense Messaging System, as a way of getting more commonality in terms of how telegram traffic and reporting were being distributed among the State Department and the Defense Department. That was never adopted, now there's a group in the Department that's going off on another tangent to establish yet another brand new Internet-driven platform. There were many recommendations that we picked up from the SMI, the Strategic Management Initiative, repackaged, put into the Department's Reinventing Government report which was about 300 pages of action recommendations. It was written like an Inspector's report so you could go through and find recommendations to cover everything. It never went anywhere. Nothing happened. Nothing. Not a thing.

Q: Was there any effort, I mean did anything happen with the discrepancies between other agency's treatment of their people and State Department employees working in our embassies or not?

LA PORTA: Not at all. In fact there was a distinct unwillingness of anyone in the personnel system or elsewhere in management to specifically talk to their equivalents over in the Agency about the employee benefits and so forth. We did some of this in a working group that was established in about 1995 or '96 on the role of secretaries, OMSers, Office Management Specialists. We insisted and I insisted, (I was the head of this group from the AFSA standpoint) and we worked with the DG's office team to look at the best practices. We wanted to look at the best and how the Agency does it. We finally were able to get enough information because the Agency had basically disestablished secretary positions a number of years before. They had some people titled secretaries in the domestic service, but had nobody performing those kind of functions overseas unless they were a spouse of one of the Agency officers who was hired to sit in the office of the chief of station. They used their career people as reports officers or as administrative officers, true executive assistants, and we wanted the Department to move in that direction. With the help of the information that we got from the Agency and some discussion with them, we drew up new sample job descriptions for OMSers at each level. A lot of that was actually implemented.

Q: What about your relations with Congress? Who was your contact or what was your contact during the time you were there, how did you find this?

LA PORTA: Well, we had a very active relationship with the Congress, indeed that was one of the things I personally not only learned, but relearned that it really is necessary for leaders in the Department to have a very constant and easy relationship with key parts of the Hill. In AFSA we have been extremely fortunate to have Ken Nakamura as our congressional relations officer. Ken came off the Hill and was working for one of the foreign relations subcommittees. He came to work for AFSA and he's been with AFSA for almost 20 years now. Ken does a superb job because he just keeps up with so much, whether its retirement benefits or other parts of the legislative agenda. Basically Ken made sure that all of us in AFSA, whether it was the State Standing Committee or USAID or others, regularly got down to the Hill. We always had something to say to the relevant committees.

Q: What committees?

LA PORTA: The three levels of committees that we dealt with were the appropriations committees on both sides, the authorizing committees on both sides and the Civil Service committee, primarily in the House.

Q: Let me just. Okay.

LA PORTA: I think AFSA can be rightly proud of its congressional outreach program. They've done well on the Hill and I think it's all been necessary work. I think we've been able to mitigate a lot of the personnel concerns that are peculiar to the Foreign Service, as well as to mitigate some damage born out of misimpressions that people on the Hill have. The thing that you constantly ran up against on the Hill, and this is particularly true in appropriations and the civil service committees, is why does the Foreign Service need to be different? Why does it need its own system? It's very difficult, especially with the increasing number of domestic personnel being posted overseas, to explain why the Foreign Service is different. It's also necessary to point out to them that, when domestic personnel go overseas, they either adopt the Foreign Service scales for housing, travel, working conditions, etc. or get premium salary or in the case of the CIA, get premium pay and other concessions like premium travel.

Q: Did you find the constituencies of the working Foreign Service type and the retired people? I mean were these almost incompatible for mass of perspective?

LA PORTA: I think that for the most part there was very little overlap and conflict between the two. The retiree affairs unit of AFSA has done a pretty good job working with the Civil Service unions and other employee organizations in keeping up with retiree issues. Largely those did not affect the rest of the budget or other personnel issues that we were prosecuting, especially in the thorny area of employee insurance and other benefits. There really was not much difference at all. I attribute that to the fact that in some respects the Foreign Service system has produced what I would consider superior mechanisms. In other words, the Foreign Service parts of the Federal Health Benefits Program, for example, what our primary insurer, the American Foreign Service Protective Association, provides in their overseas coverage is now becoming a model for federal health benefits as a whole. Again, I like to think that the Foreign Service was at the leading edge on some of those things.

Q: Were there any other issues that we should take up do you think during that time?

LA PORTA: I think we just about covered everything. I think really to conclude this chapter that the Clinton administration years and the 1990s were not good for the Foreign Service in many respects. I think that morale was really dragging. There were far more employee complaints than there were positive things. The fact that people felt things were not good also benefited AFSA membership; people tend to join AFSA when things are going not so well than when they're going very well. I think that we saw an incremental rise in AFSA membership. In the State Department office we had a regular practice of making sure that all the mail was answered because it's just terribly important. You just didn't set something aside. You can go back and say, yes, we're working on it or some such and such was resolved or yes, we hear you. We had a process or we have a committee or whatever it is that's going on, but we really had to make an effort to answer the mail. There were a lot of changes during that period in terms of the Internet usage and additional things that we were able to provide.

I was elected by the membership as AFSA president and I served as AFSA president for about seven months. For totally reasons outside the personnel system, I had been identified by the East Asia bureau to become ambassador in Mongolia, so I had an enormous decision to make.

This itself had a story which is probably wroth telling right now in the sense that the ambassadorship in Ulaanbaatar had been vacant for over a year and the Asia bureau had proposed some candidates that either did not find favor in the White House or were kind of not popular on the Hill so were withdrawn. The bureau asked me if I would be interested in going to Mongolia. Considering my work in AFSA for the previous two years and then having just been elected president of AFSA, I found it very difficult to make the choice. I sought the counsel of some of the older and grayer beards in the Foreign Service Association and without exception my friends said this only happens to you once, so if you don't do it you'd be a doggone fool. I had to, as gracefully as I could, say that you elected me, but I'm sorry I'm going to go off and do something else. It was not my idea of keeping faith with the people out there in the rank and file.

That said, with the help of the AFSA board, I was able to arrange for a worthy successor, the officer who had been elected to replace me as State vice president, Dan Geisler. He's now retired from the Foreign Service, but Dan even as an FS-01 officer took that job and I was glad to have him do it.

Q: Did you get at all looking at the system, I'd been long gone out of it, before we got into the bidding system. I found this very difficult to think that I've heard political counselor in Manila was going begging with people who are dying to be DCM and rinky-dink little, little African posts when you know, I mean, for the good of the Service, for knowledge and all, I mean obviously the political counselor in Manila is far more important than being DCM in some small African country.

LA PORTA: Not only is that phenomenon serious, and its one that I mean I dare say I think we've lived with ever since the so-called open assignments system was created in 1974. But it was the system or that phenomenon, that was all the more exacerbated in the 1990s because of the reductions in numbers of personnel and the numbers of people at the senior level, meaning that a lot of second tier jobs or even third tier jobs were going begging and they simply could not be filled. That's why the Department had to resort to putting large numbers of retirees in those positions as well as filling swing positions in the Department and interim vacancies with retired officers. They refused to admit it, but management discovered that they didn't have enough people to do the job when they needed it.

Now, the emphasis on "build back" is not only to come up to a level of sufficiency in terms of personnel numbers, but also to have a training complement that is now about 6% in terms of the overall number of positions. If you adopt the military standard would be 12%. Yes, this is an issue and this is one of the dislocations of the so-called open assignments system. There's another facet of the open assignments system that I think almost every officer finds absolutely distastefuthis is having to go around and sell themselves (the "meat market" if you will) to peddle yourself to bureaus every two to four years. I found it distasteful as an individual. This is why we in AFSA really tried to press the Department to institute an effective mentoring system. We also pressed on them in a dialogue over senior assignments to implement succession planning. This is not a new idea but was developed in Management Operations back in the mid 1980s. The idea was to say bureau managers have to spend a lot of time on professional development. If an assistant secretary thinks about personnel issues 2% of his or her week that's a lot. More often than not, they don't think about personnel issues at all unless they happen to be involved in an assignment or their own future.

Consequently, this lack of attention and in some cases rank disdain for developing people has resulted in not having the right people when we need them, where we need them. I already used the example that the Department TIC'd out three of the four 4/4 Cambodian speakers and we had nobody to replace them; we had nobody to become ambassador to Cambodia when Charlie Twining's assignment was over. We had to put in a Vietnamese speaking officer and that obviously didn't go down too well. You have other things. Where is that qualified economic officer who knows the Philippines when we need him or her because there's probably only one or two officers out there who are capable of fulfilling the economic minister job in Manila.

Today going back to East Asia, there are so many odd fits, if not mismatches in personnel, and I'm not talking about people who got to post and didn't like what they found after having had language training and didn't want to continue in the area. I'm talking about people who just hadn't a clue what it was like to serve in Asia when they had all of their prior service in Africa or Latin America. We need to do better at that kind of cross-fertilization. The Department managers really need to tackle this issue of making sure that we chart more carefully the careers of officers who are going to be associated with a particular bureau over the long span of years. In other words, if you know somebody is primarily an Asianist you want to make sure that you have jobs when the officers are considered for assignment.

Q: It's almost a philosophical question, but did you look at the idea of is the Foreign Service a profession?

LA PORTA: We did and we concluded that it was because we defined ourselves as professionals. This is not only reflected in law going back to the early 20th Century. But I think by analysis the skill sets, the way we do things, the kind of altruism that is required is no different than a military person, and if the military can be a profession, jolly well, we should be. I think that is an argument that will go on for probably decades more.

Q: Yes, well, I've been looking at it over time and with the people I talk to doing this for my own experience, too really is. I mean we have a different outlook. We rightly or wrongly, see foreign affairs as something to deal with is different I think from the normal person who's looking at it. I was wondering we're moving up to.

LA PORTA: Current events.

Q: Today is the 5th of October, 2004. Al, we've come to Mongolia I guess. How did that come about first?

LA PORTA: First of all, you might say that the assignment was a surprise. A few months earlier I had just been elected as president of AFSA by a vote of the members worldwide. It was in May that I got a call from the East Asia bureau, asking if I would entertain the possibility of going to Mongolia if I were asked by the White House. It took a lot of soul searching for me to decide whether to do that because I had just received the popular mandate from AFSA to be president and I was barely into my term. I would have to bail out with all the implications for a succession, reforming of the AFSA leadership, etc. It was not an easy thing.

On the other hand, the East Asia bureau had been unable to fill that job for about a year and a half. One of the reasons, in addition to remoteness and the reputation that it was a pretty rudimentary place with lots of discomforts, was that they had a couple of nominees that they had been considering, neither of whom was acceptable to the White House or to the Congress where they would face some problems. In the cases of the other officers whom the bureau considered, it was a matter of suitability. One officer had a legal case against him for a dispute he had in Burma, while another did not have a sterling record in Taiwan.

So they came and asked me. I had been on a list of senior officers in the DG's office and in the East Asia bureau eligible for chief of mission assignment. This turn was quite unexpected. Some of my close friends and advisors in AFSA, people that I worked with closely in the organization, said, you know, this opportunity only comes once and you better do it if you want to kind of fill out your career in the Foreign Service. So, they made it very easy for me to be able to withdraw from the presidency with grace and to support a successor, Dan Geisler who proved to be an immensely able president of AFSA for two terms. So, Dan succeeded me after I had a little bit of part time language training and trying to ease out of my job in AFSA plus get ready and learn as much as I could about Mongolia. It's the other end of Asia from where I had been serving almost all of my career. I was able to get confirmed in September and departed for post in October.

Apart from part-time language training for four months, I had the Ambassadorial "charm" course for three weeks, not exactly a full preparation, but enough. My confirmation process was clean-cut. Senator Dick Lugar was the only member at the hearing for me and two other chiefs of mission. I had known Lugar (whose sister was a contemporary of my wife's at Denison University in Ohio) and his chief foreign affairs aide, Andy Semmel, who later went on to be deputy assistant secretary in the arms control bureau. The hearing was friendly and routinthe best outcome for a career nominee.

Q: Al, just to put down, you were ambassador from when to when?

LA PORTA: From 1997 to 2000.

Q: During your career you'd been in a number of places, but had you heard anything, had Mongolia ever crossed your radar at all?

LA PORTA: In fact it did. I became interested and involved in Central Asia going back to my post-graduate career when I was an area studies instructor at the National Security Agency in 1963 after I left the Army. I spent some time in graduate school studying Asian history dealing with cultures, religions, the geography, etc. Yes, I knew where Mongolia was. It was an area that I've always been interested in and just never had an opportunity to get involved with during my career up to that point.

Q: When you were going out there, what were you getting from the bureau? I mean what were our interests in Mongolia? What were our concerns?

LA PORTA: We were very fortunate to have an absolutely superb desk officer at that time. Her name was Ann McConnell. She resided in the China desk, the Office of China and Mongolian Affairs. Although none of the other officers or any of the officers in that office had served in Mongolia, they certainly had a very good grasp of current events, so in terms of preparation and dealing with the other agencies, in particular the Defense Department, USAID and some others, we were very connected indeed. Mongolian lore is not exceptionally large in the State Department, but going back to the early '50s the State Department had trained one or two Mongolists every ten years or so in the Mongolian language. All parts of the U.S. Government, as well as NGO's and democracy organizations, were very bullish on Mongolia. They felt that, as a transitioning democracy, the Mongols were extremely receptive and hospitable. They were certainly all of that and we had very good support in the executive agencies and the Congress.

Q: I've interviewed Bill Brown later ambassador to Thailand and Israel, but he among other languages I think Chinese and Russian, he learned Mongolian.

LA PORTA: Stapleton Roy was another and there were several more. On the other hand, the important thing that characterized Mongolia in Washington's mind during the entire decade of the '90s was that it was a country in transition from Soviet authoritarianism to democracy. It was really a remarkable treat in every respect to be associated with kind of that kind of democratization experience. Mongolia had a good reputation. It began in 1989 when it began to take advantage of Gorbachev's glasnost and demonstrated political independence.

In the mid-1980's Mongolia, in response to Glasnost, began to demonstrate some independence insofar as internal politics were concerned and began some openings to the outside world. But like the Central Asian countrieKazakhstan all the way across to the CaucasuMongolia was very much a closed country to external influence as compared to the European members of the Warsaw Pact which had a much greater national identity and preexisting histories of independence that gave them a Westward outlook.

Q: When you went there were there any concerns about, were there other than good will and wanting to see this develop this way? Did we have anything like wanting to put bases in there or deny bases to somebody or use it as any trade items? Were there any sort of concrete things we wanted?

LA PORTA: The main thing that attracted the Washington agencies was really Mongolia's geostrategic position lying between Russia and China. There was a very strong interest, whether during the Bush administration or later in the Clinton years and especially under Madeleine Albright, in seeing Mongolia pursue a steadily independent course to become aligned with Western interests in Asia as opposed to kind of a more Eastward looking interest like Central Asia.

Q: It definitely was not considered, although it may have been a part, but one of the Stans as the sort of linked together the countries that were.

LA PORTA: Actually excluded in legislation, they were not included as one of the "Stans" because the "Partnership for Peace" (PfP)which was NATO's Eastward embrace, if you will, if not expansion, stopped at Kazakhstan. PfP swept in the Caucasus and all of the Central Asian countries, but did not extend to Mongolia and the Easternmost portion of what was then the Soviet Bloc. It is remarkable that, in fashioning that legislation under the Bush administration, Mongolia was considered the appendage of the area that most Sovietologists were interested in. It never occurred to them that one of the most Soviet states in fact was in Mongolia and that there was also a job to do there. I personally believe, and I've discussed this recently with the president of Mongolia when he was in Washington for a state visit, that Mongolia should again lobby to become part of the "Partnership for Peace." While I was working in NATO in Naples I tried to exercise persuasion in Brussels with the NATO secretariat to get more recognition for Mongolia, but not with any degree of success. I think that it was just too far a stretch for most of the European countries, even among Asianists in European capitals who knew something about the region.

Mongolia, in addition to its geostrategic location and growing identity toward the West, considered the United States its "third neighbor." The first two neighbors were Russia and China obviously, but for real assurance and protection the Mongols looked to the United States because they said only the United States has the power, the interest and commitment to counterbalance the other two.

Q: This is sort of, for them, the America card. We used to call it the China card.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. The Mongols were not rude about it, but they talked about the "third neighbor" relationship. To tell you the truth, while I was there I didn't do anything to discourage it either. Let me add that during the time I was in Mongolia there were some very significant steps that Mongolia took to align itself with Western and pro-U.S. interests. For example, it became a membewith our assistancof the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC). This in an economic sense gave it a certain view on the Asian economic community, including Japan, Australia, and others, as distinct from looking to its former Warsaw Pact associations in Europe or furthering relations with Russia.

The second thing is that Mongolia became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, ARF. The ASEAN Regional Forum is a political and security body created by ASEAN to embrace ASEAN's partners, including China, Korea, Japan, the United States and others. They also had a low level relationship with North Korea, which has subsequently been admitted as a member of the ARF. Mongolia became a member of the ARF in 2001. That began a new era in officially opening up in the defense sphere. Its multilateral relationships with the rest of Asia have been extremely useful to the Mongols in terms of developing a genuine regional outlook which they were not allowed to do under Soviet control. They have developed a pattern of being very involved and constructive in many of the ASEAN Regional Forum committees and other bodies.

Q: Well, now again before you went out, I assume that you talked to the Russian desk and the China desk. In other words, what were their, would they have any concerns? From our perspective were we concerned about the relations with Mongolia as far as Russia and China?

LA PORTA: Very much and there are a number of issues in that. One is the obvious negative intention to deny either China or Russia any new or further territorial advantage from being in Mongolia. We also had an interest in getting Mongolia's cooperation in a number of sensitive areas. Not bases, but we did have an interest in talking to the Mongols about some issues relating to China and North Korea, but not necessarily Russia. It was a certain proximity to North Korea, although they do not share a common border, but it is separated by Manchuria and there was some flow of so-called refugees from North Korea into Manchuria. Some of those found their way into Mongolia.

Primarily though, it was wanting to see the Mongolians develop their political independence and not again fall under the sway of either of the large neighbors. We did have some concrete interest on the military side and this is something that I worked on actively during the three years that I was there, including the establishment of a resident Defense Attachï¿½ Office. We had a desire to promote the Mongolian armed forces as a peacekeeping force because Washington and certainly we in Ulaanbaatar correctly perceived that a good way to achieve some degree of Western professionalism and military modernization was through peace keeping training, improving the capabilities of their personnel, units and so forth. Under the international military education and training program (IMET), and what was also known as enhanced IMET for peacekeeping and force modernization, we devoted a lot of attention to professionalism. Retooling their personnel system, their budgeting system, doing things to assist their parliament to exercise oversight, was some of the things we concentrated on, plus acculturation in the laws of modern warfare, and acquaintance with the Geneva Convention. Also important was English language training because the Mongols only spoke Russian and had a very poor track record in the military with English. We began to do a lot of training of high level officers at the Monterrey Postgraduate School in California, the Defense Legal Institute in Providence, Rhode Island, and some other training of commanders as well.

By the end of my time there in late 2003 we had also initiated a non-commissioned officer training program. We had signed an agreement for a twinning of the Mongolian armed forces with one of our state national guards. We expanded technical assistance activities to do surveys of the old Russian bases for ordinance and chemical contamination and all kinds of things.

Q: Did the Mongolians have a draft or was this going to be a volunteer military?

LA PORTA: They did have conscription and normally it was an 18 month mandatory term for all school leavers. In practice, however, as in most of the communist societies, they gave liberal exceptions to basically anybody who wanted them. But their intention was and still is to move toward a professional military force. To further that along we paid special attention to retraining and equipping an elite battalion, now we're doing the same thing for a second elite battalion and personnel from those battalions have served in Iraq.

Q: One of the great weaknesses of the Soviet military I've heard has been its non-commissioned officer corps. It's not very good. They've got officers way down the line whereas we rely on NCOs to do things and these are very professional, the Soviets really didn't have, they relied too much on the officer corps.

LA PORTA: Oh, absolutely. Mostly lieutenants and captains in the Soviet system do what non-commissioned officers do in Western armies. This is one of the transitions that Mongols have had to make in their military concepts because in a peacekeeping role you have to have non-commissioned officers talking to each other and officers talking to each other on equivalent levels. Non-commissioned officers have a great deal more responsibility in field operations and the conduct of peacekeeping than does the officer corps.

Q: Was there a disconnect or a problem as we moved into this because the Western idea, particularly the American idea, is quite different than the old Soviet model?.

LA PORTA: I always used to say that Mongols were very quick not to let a good idea go by. They're normally so eager to grasp new ideas and to run with them. They did accept that. I think it became a problem in terms of military transformation in two respects. Number one, they have a very heavy territorial structure. They have large bases that were left over from the Soviet period which they continue to keep warm and some of those bases are important economically in the far flung expanse of Mongolia. They're unable to really find a good way to really disengage from that. Although there are now plans to convert one base south of Ulaanbaatar into a new international airport and to convert another base area not far from Ulaanbaatar into an industrialization zone.

The second area in which they had difficulty in adjusting is they have hoards and hoards of juntanks, armored personnel carriers, vehicles of all sorts, artillery in incredible proportions that is totally useless. They had gotten this equipment from the Soviets beginning back in the '40s and '50s that they are still maintaining it, waiting for something to happen, waiting for mobilization day and these things of course can't be mobilized. I've had some recent discussion with our current ambassador in Mongolia about the desirability of tackling this issue.

Q: Who's that?

LA PORTA: Pamela Slutz. I have talked with Pam and others about starting a program to cut all that old material up for junk, put it on railcars, send it to China, sell it as scrap, make some money, put it into a revolving fund to buy new weaponry or equipment. I think that there are some people in the armed forces who would like to do that, but they said we have these end use agreements with the Russians and the Russians won't let us do it. I don't know how far that is the case, but I think there is a good argument to be made for doing something like that. China right now is consuming every pound of scrap metal it can buy and now is exactly the time to take advantage of that, even if you get a few cents on the pound or hundred weight.

Q: When you were there was there any particular concern about a threat from either the Russians or the Chinese?

LA PORTA: Not in the military sense. I think that there were concerns over the range of transnational criminal issues, certainly narcotics trafficking. We did know that there were narcotics moving from Kazakhstan to North Korea and out of North Korea to other places. I think we also had some evidence of cross-border traffic in narcotics from China.

Q: How about border guards?

LA PORTA: The border guards was the next point I was going to mention and I'm glad you did. One of our projects that we did do under IMET and we got a special FMF, Foreign Military Financing, for this was the creation of a border communications system. We got grant aid from the United States to basically build them a border communications network where none previously existed as there was an open border with Russia. Although they had posts on the China border, they had no means of reliable communications. In many remote areas, the border posts communicated with each on horseback. They just put a soldier on horseback and said go over there and tell our neighbors down the line what's going on. We were able to get funding for $3,000,000 in grant FMF in order to put in a border communications system that was partially line of sight, i.e., cell telephone and partially satellite.

Q: Was there a concern I know in the mid '90s I was in Kazakhstan for a little while and one of their concerns was the spillover of the Chinese population. Kazakhstan had 4,000,000 people and just the other side of the mountains were a billion plus Chinese. They didn't want to have a lot of Chinese come in. What about the Mongolians?

LA PORTA: Certainly the demographic factors play very heavily in the China border lands whether its inner Mongolia or Xinjiang province. In the last 30 years the Han Chinese population in inner Mongolia has moved from around 15% to basically being a majority.

Q: Now is inner Mongolia, part of Mongolia?

LA PORTA: No it is not. Inner Mongolia continued to be part of China after the fall of the Chinese Empire in 1913 and after Mongolia became fully independent in 1921. Inner Mongolia had traditionally been an area of primary Chinese influence. Inner Mongolia comprises the southern part of the Gobi Desert and extends not too far from Beijing. Yes, the fear of Chinese demographic expansionism as well as political expansionism is a major fear of the Mongols.

Now, what's happening now is that, through Chinese aid and smiling diplomacy, Chinese influence in the economic sector in Mongolia is increasing, not only through the establishment of Chinese owned textile factories in Mongolia to take advantage of the textile quotas for trade for the United States, but also through extractive mineral enterprises. The Chinese are now developing a nickel mine in Southeastern Mongolia and plan to build a narrow gauge railway into China. They are investing in oil and gas exploration and development in Eastern China along the Manchurian border. They're also interested in other mining enterprisecopper and golin other parts of Mongolia. Today they are the leading importer of Mongolian cashmere and other kinds of wool. They also import camel hair from Mongolia and today they're the major recipient of copper ore concentrate from the large very large Mongolian mine and smelter at Erdenet. The terms of trade have totally shifted from the Soviet period whereas all of the output from the Erdenet copper mine went through Russia. It is now almost entirely going to China.

Q: Let's talk a bit about as you saw Mongolia economically. I mean what does it have?

LA PORTA: Well, Mongolia has a very thin economic base. It is a pastoral country. It has under 3,000,000 people spread across an area that extends from New York to Las Vegas and from the Canadian border south to St. Louis. It's a very wide sausage-shaped country, very sparsely populated, although roughly 60% of the population still is outside of urban areas and are mainly nomadic. The economic base traditionally has been animals and animal products, so to the extent that Mongolia has profited very handsomely in recent years from its exports of cashmere and of wool products, this is hardly the cornerstone of national development.

For the longer term three things that are important. One is mineral resources and I mentioned a number of them, nickel. There are very large copper deposits. There are other minerals, including some exotic minerals that are exploitable in quantity. Probably more important for the longer run are oil and gas. There are provable deposits of both oil and gas in Eastern Mongolia. There is oil production today that is being sent to Chinese power plants in the border area in Manchuria. This kind of development can measurably increase and I think could become a real mainstay of the of Mongolian economy for the longer term. The third area is energy because, whether you use domestically produced gas or coal, with more efficient power plants Mongolia would have a surplus of electricity to export to Chinese cities near the southern border or to locations in Siberia. Prospects for geothermal or hydropower are extremely limited unfortunately as Mongolia is basically a very dry place. It doesn't have any real large rivers that make them susceptible to putting significantly large hydropower stations up.

Q: Let's talk a bit about when you got there. What were the embassy and the capital like? And then we'll talk about the government.

LA PORTA: Before we went to Mongolia, people had alerted us to the fact that a lot of common goods were not readily available, whether food products or just household things even the brand of toilet paper that you liked as well as clothing and household things. So, we were prepared to live in a society of acute scarcity. Indeed a decade before there had been real scarcity when the power system had broken down. The coal mines weren't working. The heating systems in the cities were not producing, the importation of a lot of goods had almost ceased and there was a lot of hardship. I think you'll have to talk to Joe Lake about the time when he was ambassador from '91 to '93.

Q: He went to Albania, didn't he?

LA PORTA: He later went to Albania.

Q: I did get to talk to him. His embassy consisted of his wife and his son. They put plywood on the bathtub in order to have a place to put the Xerox machine or something.

LA PORTA: Yes, that's true. At the time I went, the embassy consisted of a DCM cum Admin officer and an economic-consular officer, a Public Affairs Officer, and a political officer and that was it. Within the year we added a general services officer and then we expanded significantly when we got a defense attachï¿½ office and we split apart the economic and consular positions. That said, we were prepared for spartan living. We took a lot of things that we thought we would need based on our other experiences in Indonesia and elsewhere. In point of fact, what we found was that in 2000 and 2001 the economy really began to open up and pick up. A lot more goods, mainly imported from China but also from other places, began to appear in the local markets. We found that, yes, you could get Tyson's brand chicken that came to Mongolia via Russia. You basically got the chicken parts nobody else was buying; the chicken backs and wings all went to China, while the breast parts stayed in the United States or went to Europe. The rest of the chicken, thighs, legs and a few other parts, showed up in Mongolia. On the other hand, it was better than having no chicken at all because there was no indigenous poultry production.

We lived unexpectedly well on imported goods off the local market and the things that we brought with us. When we arrived in the fall of 2000, the city's first and for a long time only French restaurant had just opened. It certainly wouldn't be comparable to anything here in Washington, but was owned by two Corsicans who had passably good food as well as some pretty good wine. That restaurant had just opened, and there was a Korean restaurant, a Japanese restaurant, and a pizza place that also had pasta run by two Mongols who had lived and worked in Italy. They came back to Mongolia and established what started out as a little hot dog place outside the university and they built it up into a chain; when we left three years later they had four restaurants, including a Mexican restaurant and steak house. They did very well. At least you were able to have some other outlets. There were also a few hotels, most of which were old Soviet style hotels, but at least they were there places to go and places to have receptions and other events.

Our embassy was quite small at the time and, as I mentioned, was located in a building that had at one time been built as a combined EU embassy. The French and Germans never went ahead with that experiment in co-existence. So when the U.S. Embassy wanted to open up full time back in 1990, we began negotiations with the government and were given that property. It is a concrete block building, altogether remarkably serviceable. We had trouble with the heat which came from the city, so they put up a backup heating system, eventually a backup electric generator and we put in our own communications system which was upgraded twice while I was there.

Space-wise it was pretty respectable. The offices weren't bad. We improved some of the interior space, created some additional space for local employees and we built a small annex that housed our administrative offices, a little recreation room and a warehouse. We were all on one compound on the northwest side of the city in a very good location overlooking an erstwhile river that didn't have much water in it except during the spring runoff. It wasn't too bad and we were out of the thick of the smog because with all the power plants burning coal and a lot of households burning wood or coal fires during the winter, the place got pretty smoggy.

Our embassy was also notable for the fact that it had the ambassador's residence embedded, another Eastern Bloc attribute. Our ambassadorial residence was a wing of the chancery building and so we could enter through the main lobby or we had a separate private entrance. We lived in a small townhouse that was fine for the two of us. We thought it was great. I loved it because I was just a few feet away from my desk. Since you were on the embassy phone system everything worked, later on we got the cable TV and the armed forces radio and television network. We were very happy in our snug little quarters. Where the place came up short was in entertainment space, but later in the last year we had the recreation room that was used for parties and entertaining large numbers of people, including the 4th of July reception.

Our American staff in the beginning lived in a ramshackle ten story apartment building called Faulty Towers, located about 300 yards from the chancery building. It was really a trial to try to keep those apartments in livable condition. Finally, for security reasons, not only for regular security threats, but also the threat of break-ins, we had to put in extra security measures and put guards on the door where the foreigners lived. I think the ambassador was reasonably well off in living in the chancery, but the staff were less well off living in Faulty Towers. For that reason my DCM at the time, the first DCM that I had as well as the second, spent a lot of their time trying to establish housing alternatives. Today the ambassador has moved out of the chancery. The former residence has now been converted into more office space. The ambassador lives in, and all the staff live in an apartment and housing complex. The ambassador has a freestanding house. The DCM has a smaller freestanding house and all the staff live in condo type townhouses in the same enclosure. It's not connected with the office. Being in the chancery was certainly a convenience when it got down to 25 degrees below zero and you didn't have to go out in the morning.

Q: All right, let's talk about how you were received by the government and who were some of the personalities and how effective, how did you find working with them?

LA PORTA: The issue of governance and our being able to work with the government was one of a truly superb aspects of being in Mongolia because we were fortunate in being able to deal with not only a government and society in transition, but you were also able to deal with remarkably open, intelligent, forward looking and outgoing Mongols. When I arrived, the Democratic coalition was in power. The first Democratic prime minister was elected earlier in 2000; he lasted about 11 months, then there was the succession of Democratic prime ministers. The government became increasingly hamstrung over the nearly four years of its life by what I called the tyranny of the minority as the former communist party, called the Mongolian Peoples Revolutionary Party or MPRP, basically prohibited the coalition from contracting any business in parliament because it always blocked a quorum. MPRP MPs never came to sessions or sat and dithered away, and so blocked any possible means of progress on the part of the Democrats. That said, it was really a pleasure to work with the Democratic politicians. We also had good relations with the Revolutionary Party politicians, the leader of the opposition who later became prime minister and also the president. There was a remarkably open system in which we had access to all levels of government.

We had a USAID project which we had a very talented economist who was an advisor in the prime minister's office. We had another AID project that worked on privatization. We had others that worked on energy reform. All of the key issues were being worked on, including military reform, were being worked on by the United States. We provided democracy building assistance by the International Republican Institute (IRI) which did a terrific job in working with the politicians in parliament and elsewhere. We had the Asia Foundation and the Soros Open Society Institute, all of which received grants from USAID and from the DRL, Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau in the State Department, to do different kinds of things including development of civil society, women's rights and so forth.

A year into our tour USAID wanted to develop a project in the rule of law and to craft a strategy for legal reform. So, my wife having been an attorney, was hired for that purpose under an AID contract. She worked with subcontractors to develop a strategy for the judiciary, training the legal profession and other things that the judiciary needed. For two of the three years we were in Ulaanbaatar, my wife was occupied with that project. As we were leaving during the last few months, the reform strategy was accepted by the Mongolian government. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor visited us in Ulaanbaatar. She was a great lady and had a superb visit. She and her husband were fascinated by Mongolia. The legal reform strategy was launched. The AID agreements were signed. There were a number of contracts that are still ongoing to this day that were responsible for working with the Mongols in that field. We were involved with an exceptionally broad range of activities, including humanitarian and social issues like pension reform, that were terribly important.

Q: What was the role of women?

LA PORTA: The role of women in Mongolia is one of the true bright spots among the transitioning communist countries because women in Mongolia were remarkably well educated under the Soviet system. Being extremely forceful and intelligent they immediately gravitated to the top ranks of the reformers. There were a number of forward looking, progressive women's organizations that were interested not only in women's rights, but also in family violence and crime, homelessness in terms of also in elections and legal reforms. Women moved into prominent roles or pioneering roles in that society. They are indeed remarkable ladies.

Q: Was there any residue of the KGB and its system there?

LA PORTA: There was a residue and there was a local KGB that turned out to be remarkably benign. While people alleged that there might have been some overhang of influence from the current KGB in Moscow, I don't think that that was ever satisfactorily proved, although in the Mongolian body politic you certainly had people who were more pro-Russian than they were pro-Western. The body for state security, or SSA as it was known, was remarkably accessible to us. They developed cordial relationships with parallel institutions on the U.S. side including the FBI and others.

Q: They must have had a relatively small Foreign Service didn't they?

LA PORTA: They did have a fairly small Foreign Service although again they were quite highly talented. Mongolia joined the United Nations in 1961. Before that they were very heavily closeted; in fact some of the older diplomats told me that the Russian posture toward Ulaanbaatar on matters of foreign relations was don't worry, we'll take care of that for you. The Mongolian foreign ministry although nominally independent, slavishly followed the Moscow line in all respects. They did have separate ties with East Germany and Poland in particular, more than with other Bloc countries. All of the Bloc countries including Cuba maintained embassies in Mongolia and so you still had a few legacies of that. There was a Cuban embassy that consisted of one officer. The North Koreans closed their embassy while we were there. The Lao embassy was right next door to ours incidentally. The Laotian communist link was still considered important enough for them to have stationed an ambassador and a couple of officers there. The ambassador in fact was quite a nice fellow; we didn't have any problems over the side fence with the Lao.

With the establishment of its mission in New York in 1961 the Mongolian foreign ministry began gradually to learn about the outside world. One of the more fascinating experiences that we had was talking with a group of officers who were stationed in New York in the early 1960s about what their life was like. In typical Soviet fashion all of them had to live in the Mongolian mission. They had to take their meals together. They only had minimal contacts with delegations other than the Bloc countries. They were thoroughly brainwashed, even by their own admission, as to what they would experience in New York. One of them told me that they had expected to see tanks, artillery and soldiers on every street corner of New York. They had been lectured at great length by the Russians about the evil ways of the West. They were absolutely shocked and surprised to find that virtually nothing of what the Soviets had told them was true.

In the 1960s the Mongolians began to develop an interest in foreign affairs on the Western style; this included their missions in Western Europe that they began to slowly establish. They began to go abroad for education. Usually two or three Foreign Service Officers a year were allowed to go to the UK, France or Germany for higher study. The foreign minister today was in the recent Revolutionary Party government. He was one of the officers who went to New York in the early days. As a group officers who began to serve in the West in the '60s and early '70s are quite articulate, fascinating people, have lots of interests and they're no dummies. Basically their problem was that they were dominated by the Russians and independent thought was not encouraged.

Q: What was the attitude towards the Russians and towards the Chinese, that you were picking up from the groups, whatever you want to call them the political groups.

LA PORTA: The prevailing view was they don't want to go back to either side. They don't want to go back to the days of Soviet domination even though it was acknowledged that the Soviets were responsible for most of the modernity in the country. After the communist revolution of 1921 basically everything that was modern was built by the Russians and the Russians admittedly had a good educational system. This is why over 85% of the people in Mongolia today are literate, can read and write and have had some schooling. These achievements are remarkable and Russian education treated the Mongols fairly kindly. They had access to good universities in Moscow, in Poland, in East Germany, in the Czech Republic and in Hungary. They also turned out large numbers of artists and performers trained in the Western style. We had an opera in Ulaanbaatar that mostly did standard European works. We had a ballet that performed old chestnuts of the Bolshoi ballet, but it was there. You had good orchestras. If you coupled the Western influence that they had derived during the Soviet years with the underlying Mongol culture, you produced some very interesting things.

Q: I know when I was in Korea I was really surprised about wherever the training was, almost any Korean could stand up and sing beautifully or you'd see the school kids learning how to draw. I mean they were developing talents that I find in the United States we've let go.

LA PORTA: In the American system of values those things tend to go to the bottom. Performing arts is one of the them. As people told me in Mongolia, the Russians consciously developed Mongolians as artists, as well as circus performers, for example contortionists and acrobats today with the Cirque du Soleil or the Big Apple Circus come from Mongolia..

Q: How much did history play a role, Genghis Khan, that whole thing? You have the feeling that the Soviets, particularly tried to sit on some of these nationalistic yearnings and all. How did sort of the Mongolian history play?

LA PORTA: Well, Mongolian history did not fare very well under the Russians at all. First of all they brutally suppressed Buddhism. Buddhism by the 1900s and 1920s was not an admirable institution necessarily and the monasteries controlled vast tracts of land. They provided backward education, backward medicine to the people and were where Roman Catholicism was in rural Europe at the time of the Reformation; Buddhism was thoroughly discredited and a self-serving institution. On the other hand thousands of Buddhists Monks and their families were slaughtered or disappeared. Most of the Buddhist temples were closed. A lot of the treasures of those temples were taken by the people, hidden and remained buried for 80 years.

On the other hand, it was to the Russians' credit that they did allow a few truly historic buildings and some unique Buddhist places of worship to survive. Buddhism was reintroduced in 1989, and about 200 monks remained in the country where as there probably would have been 20,000 in the early 1930s. Buddhism is an inexplicable part of the Mongolian identity and legacy. The words Dali Lama are Mongol words, not Tibetan words. There is a strong, shared history in Buddhist tradition between Tibetans and the people of Western China, Northern India and Mongolia. While I was in Ulaanbaatar the Indian ambassador was a Buddhist monk. He led a sect from Ladakh state in Northern India where he was an independence leader with Nehru. Although he was a Buddhist monk, he sat in the Indian parliament for many years, then retired and went abroad to Mongolia as ambassador where he remained eight years. He established a temple and a small monastery right in Ulaanbaatar.

The legacy of Genghis Khan as known in the West was also suppressed. The Russians wiped out that part of Mongolian identity from schools. They discouraged any celebration of traditional Mongolian festivals. They nationalized Mongolian sports and carefully controlled them so they wouldn't become "national". Archery was a national sport; horse racing was a national sport and only rarely allowed. About the only thing I think that did survive under the Russians because it was also respectable in Russian culture was wrestling. Because Russians are also good wrestlers and wrestling is acceptable in Bulgaria and Central Asia, I think that was the one Mongolian sport that they did allow.

They did everything they could to remove Genghis Khan from the national consciousness. There is a new book written by a Jack Weatherford on Genghis Khan and modern history.

Q: I read the book and they talked about the Soviets destroying the spirit banner.

LA PORTA: Oh, yes.

Q: Of Genghis Khan.

LA PORTA: They removed anything that was large and valuable during World War II, took it back to the Soviet Union and melted it down for the war effort. Mongolia was saved from being completely wiped out in terms of its identity by its small population and its remoteness. In other words, Mongolian society was not 100% Russified as it was in some of the other Central Asian republics.

Q: It didn't suffer from either the transport and movement of those tribes or dumping people in there, either way, so it was quite fortunate.

LA PORTA: No. Unlike Kazakhstan which did have a significant influx of minority populations from Western Russia, for example the Tartars or Germans from the Volga region and so forth.

Q: Well, when you went to Kazakhstan you saw almost all of the artisans were Russian. I had the feeling it was kind of held together by Russians, not necessarily as managers, but the shoe maker or the mechanic or something like that.

LA PORTA: By 2000 the Russian population in Mongolia was very small. Just a few thousand in Ulaanbaatar who were Russian or claimed Russian nationality, most of whom were Mongolian-Russians who intermarried.

Q: Mongolia during World War II. Were there many troops or I mean problems there or do they have much of a memory of World War II?

LA PORTA: For Mongolia World War II really doesn't hold any significance at all. What did hold significance was the war with Japan, which was really fought in 1936 to 1939; and these were the border wars.

Q: There was the battle of Khalkhin Gol, the Japanese were thoroughly worked by the Mongols and Soviets.

LA PORTA: Yes, the Mongols held the Japanese back at this lake in extreme Eastern Mongolia on the Manchurian border. That stemmed the westward advance of the Japanese forces and they turned south toward China.

Q: It showed that the Japanese really weren't up to facing a really organized army at least on a flat plane or something. They really didn't have the mechanized; they were good in the jungle, but not.

LA PORTA: The accounts that I've read of it and looking at the photographs of the battlefront is that the Japanese forces tried at least three times to penetrate the Russian-Mongol line over a period of more than a year. This was an extended enterprise. The Japanese were really strung out along the Manchurian frontier and they were unable to make a breakthrough where they could get on a track to get to Ulaanbaatar which was the only thing that really counted. The Japanese fortified the border with China and there were a series of border incursions that went on into 1941 and 1942 in different places. There were accounts of several skirmishes with the Mongol border forces. Everybody knew the Japanese were there, no question about it, but the Japanese simply gave up any interest they had in moving against Mongolia after the defeat on the Manchuria border.

The only other legacy of World War II was the fact that a lot of Mongolian culture in terms of archeological and cultural artifacts was ripped off from the few remaining temples and Buddhist shrines and national university in Mongolia were taken back to Moscow. In Moscow, Leningrad and Warsaw a lot of the artifacts were stored in tunnels underneath the cities sometimes either built as air raid shelters or as part of the subway systems. In the allied bombing of those cities a lot of things were lost. It is believed that some museum quality items may still exist in the subterranean areas of Moscow, but nobody knows where they are. It's remarkable.

Q: You mentioned earlier that Japanese war veterans returned to Mongolia. Was that big tourism?

LA PORTA: The Japanese have a peculiar fascination for Mongolia which is part cultural, part war-related and part a desire to visit the wide open spaces, ride horses and do things that are impossible at home. The Japanese had a fairly large embassy in Ulaanbaatar and they trained several Mongolian language specialists every year. In addition to looking after Japanese delegations, they acted on behalf of the large Japanese companies (Mitsubishi, etc.) to channel trade and aid contracts to them, for example, for the refurbishment and maintenance of Ulaanbaatar's largest power plant.

Q: When you were there, were the Mongolian authorities trying to revive the Mongol, not the spirit of the Mongol empire, but the feeling we were a great nation before or was this...?

LA PORTA: To their credit they didn't confuse having a past in which Genghis Khan was revered with any pretensions of being something that they weren't. Unlike the Turks, which after the fall of the Soviet Union wanted to establish with Turkic speaking peoples everywhere, the Mongols never had any such pretensions. Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan established a Kazaks homeland policy and was successful in attracting about 40,000 Kazaks who lived in modern Mongolia back to Tajikistan. Now these people have fallen on hard times because they were not given access to social services and were treated as second-class citizens. They were not given rights as citizens. They did not get the jobs that were promised to them and had really become kind of a bilateral thorn in terms of Mongol-Kazak relations.

Q: You were there at a time when sort of a cyber revolution affected the world, the Internet, the access of the computer, better communications and all. How did the.

LA PORTA: The great fizzle of Y2K.

Q: Yes, everything, we were supposed to have a disaster because on the dating when we came to 2000. I mean how did the Mongolian government people cotton to this sort of thing? Was it a natural meeting, I mean the young people or not, was this an effective?

LA PORTA: The Internet revolution has been embraced by Mongols, no question about it. I think it contributed enormously to the opening up of the country since the mid 1990s and has been the cheapest way for Mongols to learn about the outside world, whether it's entertainment, art, politics or just simply being able to communicate with each other. The only thing that retarded Internet expansion in Mongolia is simply the cost of putting the system through the telephone lines, although great strides in fiber optics and digital transmission have been made in the last couple of years. Mongols, being highly educated, highly verbal and adept at technological things, love the Internet. The computer businesses in Mongolia are doing very well. Telecommunications companies are doing very well. After outsourcing has run its course in the Philippines and India, Mongolia would be a good candidate for software development and other kinds of activities. The Mongols are also good language learners. They're very adept at languages.

Q: The three years you were there, were there any particular issues you got involved in other than fostering better relations and all of this?

LA PORTA: There were several aspects of the way life in Ulaanbaatar is a little bit different than elsewhere. First was that we had almost a mentoring relationship with the current Prime Minister, Elbegdorj, who was a prime minister during the time I was there, so it's "deja vu all over again." To have such a close relationship on a personal and an intellectual basis with a governing group, not necessarily in the sense of establishing U.S. hegemony, but just helping these guys do the right thing. It was tremendously professionally rewarding.

The second thing that was very important was to really help the Mongols get deeper into and understand a lot of what Asian regionalism was all about. In other words, they had made up their mind by the time I got there that their future lay in Asia. They had to learn more and we could help them. The officers we had were good at regional economic and political affairs. We knew the regional issues. We knew the players. We knew the organizations. We worked on how Mongolia could take advantage of those kinds of opportunities to become a true contributor in the Asia region.

A third area that I thought was very important was social and humanitarian affairs. Like most transitioning societies, there was a breakdown in the ability of the government to provide for the poorest of its people. The fact that you had people who were hungry, number one, because the economy went south and they did not have access to clothing, warm boots and all the other things you need in an extremely cold climate. Hospitals could not get medicines. Their equipment wasn't repaired. The quality of care in government clinics, orphanages and everything else really suffered and went down because when the Soviet economy stopped, so did the Mongolian economy. They lost their markets that they've had to rebuild and those things don't happen overnight. There was a tremendous stress during that kind of transition that really worked hardship on the poorest people in the society. The end of communism also meant the opening up of religion, so who came in, well, lots of Christian missionaries. We went to services at the Catholic mission even though we're Episcopal/Anglicans. The Catholic mission there did terrific work in looking after homeless kids, schooling for young children, mothers and infants and retarded people. You had Christian missionaries who moved in to establish orphanages outside the state system or who did outreach work in state institutions, not only in Ulaanbaatar, but in other towns and cities. Missionaries moved into English teaching; the Mormons were very strong in their outreach in terms of education. You had a void that was being filled by missionary organizations. We had about 350 American Christian missionaries there at any one time and the population usually went up to about 700 in the summer when the weather was good.

We had a lot of relationships with the missionary community. Normally when the Foreign Service comes up against that part of our national character or experience, it usually is not a happy one. On the other hand I found it tremendously rewarding. I felt it was my job to do what I could to help the missionaries in whatever way to do their jobs in civil ways but I didn't shrink from telling them when I thought some of their proselytizing was out of bounds or unfair. We had a number of conversations with different groups about that. I felt that in terms of how they lived, what they were able to bring into the country, medicine, books, clothing, or whatever they needed to help people was entirely worthwhile and within my responsibility.

We also had concerns with the government to make sure that they didn't pass laws that infringed on freedom of religion and disadvantage the open regime that had been created during the previous decade. We've heard from missionary friends who are continuing to do good work, whether they're Catholic or evangelical Protestant or Mormons. We know many young Mongolians who have benefited from missionary education, including schooling in the United States. The Catholic mission now has a permanent church. They've installed the first Catholic bishop of Mongolia and they're now recognized as fully in the Catholic hierarchy, so things do happen.

Q: On my notes, you showed me a picture of a beautiful young lady. You might explain that.

LA PORTA: All right. Well, in 1999 a new foreign adoption law was passed by the Mongolian parliament. My wife, being an attorney, was interested in helping the state orphanage and a couple of other organizations making sure that the rules were appropriate for foreign adoptions and that all of the legalities for U.S. adoptions were observed. She facilitated the first adoption case which was of the adoption of a young boy whose adoptive parents were cousins of my son-in-law; that family lives in Pennsylvania. He was adopted a little over four years ago and he's turned out to be a great kid. When it came time for my daughter to adopt a child she looked first to Mongolia, about a year and a half ago instituting adoption formalities to an accredited international adoption agency and one of the agencies approved by the Mongolian government. In April she and her husband went to collect their daughter, who is now named Olivia, from the orphanage in Ulaanbaatar and the family arrived back in the U.S. on May 1. We have now a U.S. citizen Mongolian origin granddaughter.

Q: It's a beautiful picture. Did you find, I mean you went out under the Clinton administration. Did you find any change in relations with Mongolia when the Bush II administration came in?

LA PORTA: Well, I really wasn't there for that transition. I was there under the second Clinton administration when Madeleine Albright was Secretary of State, then I left. My wife and I arrived in San Francisco on the election day in 2000. We got to Mongolia in November 1997 and came back in late 2000, then I went on to Naples. I really wasn't there for the transition to the new administration. By all accounts I think the Mongols have found that U.S. interests vis-ï¿½-vis Mongolia have largely remained the same. The fact that democratization in Mongolia began under Bush I and George Herbert Walker Bush put a lot of store in democracy and seeing Mongolia become self-sufficient and self-standing politically and economically.

I think that, if anything, the democracy strain is a bit stronger under the current Bush administration. I think Mongolia has benefited in a number of ways. The Mongolians chose to join the "coalition of the willing" in Iraq and they're now on their third rotation of troops into Iraq. Those troops are the ones that we began to retrain and have benefited from the work that we did back in the late '90s and continuing forward.

Q: You mentioned earlier in our interview that there was a murder case in Mongolia. Is there a good consular story there?

LA PORTA: Not long after I arrived in late 1997, an American contractor trying to start a building and timber production business killed a Mongolian employee. Allegedly the Mongolian employee was a well known drunk (Mongolians do not handle alcohol welit's genetic) and attacked his American supervisor. Unfortunately the forensic evidence showed that the American stabbed the Mongolian 11 times, including several times in the back. I did not want the Embassy to get out in front on the issue so we sent a TDY officer to observe the trial. There was enormous political pressure in Washington state, the American's home, to get him released. In the end, following his conviction, he was repatriated to Washington state to serve his sentence by action of the President who is head of the judiciary. Justice was done from the Mongolian standpoint.

Q: You were in Naples from when to when?

LA PORTA: We got to Naples in January of 2001 just after New Year's and I left in October of 2003.

Q: All right. I think that's when we'll pick this up next time. We haven't gone into how you got the assignment and all that, but we'll pick that up the next time.

Today is the 19th of October, 2004. How did you get to Naples?

LA PORTA: As it often happens in this business, there was an underlap in the assignment of political advisor to the commander of NATO forces in the Southern region, that's AFSOUTH headquarters in Naples. My predecessor had curtailed his assignment because of personal reasons and the post was vacant. It turned out that the vacancy persisted for several months without the Political Military Bureau (PM) making an effort to fill it until my good friend and colleague, John Finney, took over running the POLAD office and asked why hasn't anybody done anything about filling this job? There were no good answers of course. Apparently the career management division wasn't gong to advertise it until the following year as a 2001 vacancy, so there was no institutional effort to fill the job off cycle. John Finney said, well, I know a guy that might fisomebody who has done a lot of Pol-Mil work over the yearand I know he's leaving post. John called me up and asked if I be interested. This is probably the third or fourth time that this kind of thing has happened over the years, but needless to say it took only a nanosecond for us to decide it would be just dandy to go to Naples especially as we anticipated this would be our retirement tour.

Let me just back up a little bit. Especially since my assignment was not due to end until December of 2000, the Department institutionally was not terribly interested in looking around for openings or temporary bridge assignments. They would have been just as glad if I had come home, looked around and said I'm gong to retire, and then that would have been that. As it happened this assignment to Naples was not only fortuitous in terms of timing and being able to finish out my career before I approached the age of 65, but also was a good challenge and it was certainly something that I was very much interested in doing. I'm doggone glad that I did.

Q: Could you describe the POLAD structure?

LA PORTA: POLADs (sometimes called Foreign Policy Advisors) are located at 16 major commands (COCOM's or combatant commands) world-wide. Normally a POLAD has a small office and advises the commander, normally a three-or four-star general. POLADs also are important conduits of information to State and other agencies, the civilian side of DOD, embassies in their region, and international organizations, NATO in our case. Because of my seniority (rank as an MC with fairly long time-in-grade), I was a three-star equivalent which gave me very good access and privileges.

Q: Okay, let's talk about AFSOUTH, what area did they cover and what was your role?

LA PORTA: The NATO regional command in Naples basically covers everything from Spain through to Central Asia and that includes the Mediterranean basin and the new members of NATO, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. It also includes the Balkans, Turkey, Greece, Ukraine, Russia and the Caucasus stateArmenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. We even had cooperative programs and training with the Central Asian countries. For NATO, we covered the Middle East and the Levant, plus North Africa from Egypt all the way around to Mali. NATO has a program called the Mediterranean Dialogue, which includes Jordan, significantly Israel, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Mali. It's quite an interesting institution, but this gives the NATO Southern command, which operates under the authority of Brussels, a very wide scope of action. Previously most of NATO's interest had been in the North during the Cold War and immediately after. The command that received the most attention was AFNORTH in Holland that commanded the not only the NATO AWACS fleet, but also air defense in the Northern region and all of the forces pointed at the former Soviet Union and its satellites.

The function of a POLAD, as I used to call it the in-house "pet diplomat" of the commander. Whatever authority and/or influence we had depended very much on our relationship with the commander. Before I went to Naples Admiral James Ellis was then the AFSOUTH commander or the CINC.

Q: The present administration doesn't like the term CINC.

LA PORTA: That's right. Well, Mr. Rumsfeld said that in the United States, there's only one commander in chief and that's the president and so he abolished the term insofar as the regional U.S. commanders were concerned. On the other hand the title still survives in NATO although the recent reorganization is phasing that out. Now everybody's a commander, a regional commander as distinct from a regional commander in chief. Leaving that aside, the functions of a POLAD or political advisor are to keep the commander current with civil developments within the entire area of the command's responsibility. This is a tall order in a place that has a very broad geography and hypothetical reach in terms of the application of NATO forces and other kinds of interests, such as civilian-type interests like the NATO environment program and the science and technology program. The Partnership for Peace, which is one of the most important things the NATO regional commands do, also brought us into close relationships with the new ex-Soviet states.

We construed ourselves in the POLAD office as a mini-embassy embedded in the NATO military command that looked after the commander's diplomatic and political interests. I was very fortunate because I had two extremely supportive commanders. The first was Admiral Ellis whom I served for a little more than a year. Admiral Ellis later went off to command STRATCOM at Offutt Air Force Base just outside Omaha, Nebraska that commanded all of the strategic forces, long range aircraft, missiles, and the nukes. They also had a special responsibility for global warfare and anything that required more than a regional reach. Admiral Ellis, although he had been commander in Naples for about two years was not happy with his POLAD advisor or the workings of the office. There were only four officers assigned to the POLAD office: one U.S. officer who was a Greek/Turk expert, an Italian officer, a British officer and a French officer. Basically the office had fallen into a slump, except when it came to preparing the commander for his trips. Except for meetings in Brussels the office largely was confined to answering questions.

Admiral Ellis made it clear to me when I was interviewed before I went to Naples that he wanted a pro-active organization and that he wanted somebody to look ahead and define the issues as well as to undertake longer range planning in addition to day-to-day staff work. He gave me my mandate and I will have to say I got 110% backing from Admiral Ellis and his immediate staff for everything that I did. After a little more than a year, Admiral Ellis was replaced by Admiral Gregory G. Johnson, affectionately known as Grog Johnson. He was another navy four-star admiral, a man who had a terrific political military experience as a defense advisor to former Secretary of Defense Cohen under the Clinton administration and also former military aide to Colin Powell when Powell was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Admiral Johnson was a political science graduate of the University of Maine and did not come up through the academy circuit, but I think his job as commander in Naples allowed him to expand his political military horizons and do all of those things that had been suppressed during his long military career.

The commanders in Naples had a second hat. They were dual hatted as both a NATO commander and as a U.S. commander. Both Admiral Ellis and Admiral Johnson were concurrently commanders of all U.S. naval forces in Europe, a command that is called USNAVEUR, which had its headquarters in London and is now being relocated to Naples. We had two headquarters. We had a U.S. national staff located in London. We had a multinational staff, the NATO staff located in Naples. As POLAD to Admiral Johnson and Admiral Ellis I was accredited to both headquarters. I was POLAD in London at the same time I was POLAD in Naples.

This was an interesting aspect of the job, but what this did in practical terms was allow us to draw resources, especially human resources, from both the NATO and U.S. channels. In other words, we could work both the NATO and U.S. personnel military personnel systems. Secondarily, it gave us a double barreled entree into Washington. We could play the NATO role and go through Brussels, and deal with the U.S. NATO mission in Brussels on issues, or with other diplomatic missions there, as well as the NATO International Staff, but we also had the option of going through London straight into the Navy staff back in Washington. We had a lot of relationships that I believe were able to successfully use to prosecute the commander's business.

Q: Well, All, when you arrived and as it developed, what were the major issues, countries, I mean I immediately think of the former Yugoslavia. Did you have Kosovo and all that and then build up to the Iraq business? What was the situation before 9/11 and then after 9/11?

LA PORTA: During the first year our overwhelming preoccupation was the Balkans. We always said to the admiral that he was also CINC Balkans, the commander in chief of the Balkans, but that he had other things to do in the region besides just tend to the Balkan crisis of the day. During the first year we had an outbreak of ethnic warfare in Macedonia and the POLAD office was running a 24 hour a day watch on that situation. I had to bring in extra officers from NATO in order to support our political military watch.

During that operation we functioned very much like the political-military action team or PMAT does today in the Political Military bureau in State. After 9/11 this office was stood up to run a reporting system on the conduct of the war, incorporating intelligence and other kinds of information to deal with all aspects of the conflict. We did this in the spring of 2001 for Macedonia where fighting between the Macedonian Slavs and the Albanian population broke out in earnest. It was a successful model of what we could do from the POLAD standpoint because in practicality the few of us in the POLAD office were able to get information quicker, more directly and hopefully better than was coming through the regular command and Intel channels which had to go through several levels before the information found its way to the commander.

Q: How did you get it, did you essentially have your man or talk directly to our embassy in Skopje?

LA PORTA: One of the things we did was put an officer in Skopje. We had a succession of officers, starting with a Belgian lieutenant colonel, take up residence in Skopje in the NATO office there, but he worked as an extension of our office, so he was reporting to us rather than waiting for information to go through the various NATO hands or national headquarters. We put our person on the ground very quickly.

We also worked directly with not only the U.S. mission in Macedonia and the NATO combat command organization was stood up there, but also we were in direct contact with the non-American NATO POLAD. He was, initially I think a Dutchman. We also worked bilaterally with other diplomatic missions, especially the British, to find out what was going on. We established contact with their attachï¿½s, and with my British officers we worked a pretty wide information effort in terms of collecting open source information, newspapers and other kinds of reporting.

Q: But other than getting information, what was NATO doing?

LA PORTA: Well, in the beginning NATO had a senior diplomat who along with a senior EU diplomat were trying to negotiate a stand-down between the Albanian dissident forces. It was always difficult to characterize the Albanians; you certainly didn't want to call them freedom fighters because they didn't necessarily have that as their objective. They were always vague about questions of autonomy or regional autonomy. You really couldn't call them terrorists because they did have an organization, they did have declared goals, they did have people who entered into negotiations so we usually called them just simply the dissidents because they were just unhappy with the way they were being dealt with by the Macedonian Slavic majority government. Eventually there was an extended negotiating process that lasted about two and a half months from June 2001 until roughly the middle of September in which there were numerous levels of negotiations. They finally got an agreement called the Ohrid Agreement which is named for a lake in Western Macedonia on the Albanian border.

Q: Beautiful.

LA PORTA: A lovely place and all kinds of nice hotels. The Albanian fighters and the Macedonian government agreed on a comprehensive plan for confidence building measures, including multiethnic policing, recognition of the Albanian language, using the Albanian language in the government and in parliament, conducting a real census prior to elections that were to be held in late 2001, and a range of other measures in education and social areas. The number of Albanians in the police and the armed forces was to be incremental. This negotiation occupied a number of international organizations, not only NATO and the EU, but the International Organization for Migration and even some of the UN agencies in minor ways.

We also had to cope with the refugee flow of Slavs living in Albanian majority areas or Albanians wanting to get out of the fighting. It was quite a challenge and it was one of the more successful models for diplomatic intervention and crisis resolution. There was very little loss of life, mostly people killed in sporadic incidents, and the number of NATO forces on the ground was minimal. It was only a couple thousand.

It was the position of NATO, representing all of the allies, that there was solid agreement among the allies as to what needed to be done. Once the Macedonian government as well as the Macedonian Albanians understood that this was the full weight of NATO opinion coming down on them as well as the EU, they began to honor their agreements and behave in a more civilized fashion toward each other.

Q: Now, did you accompany Admiral Ellis to Skopje and talk to the various parties and all?

LA PORTA: Constantly. I arrived in Naples on January 2nd, two days later I was on the plane with Admiral Ellis headed for Skopje. We used to get to Macedonia about every six weeks during the crisis period which lasted most of 2001 and generally speaking to other areas in the Balkans at least every two months. Admiral Johnson established the policy, after things wound down in Macedonia, of trying to get to Macedonia about every two months, and visiting with his NATO commanders in Kosovo and Bosnia at least once every six weeks, either in those capitals, in Naples or another location.

The Kosovo situation likewise was one for which there were no easy answers. It was a perfect example of all sides behaving badly and typified the old prayer book rubric of "there is no health in us" because there sure wasn't. It was the case of whether it was Slavs or different Albanian factions or the UN failing to measure up or acting out in the worst possible ways to preclude coming together or development of a genuine consensus. Consequently it was the force of NATO action backed up politically/diplomatically by the EU. NATO was really on point to keep the factions and parties who didn't like each other one bit at least engaged in some kind of effort to create a unified government.

Q: Well, Al, I'm speaking as somebody who spent five years in Yugoslavia. Did you have a Balkan hand who could take you back to 1358 or 1398? That's their modern history. But bring you up, keep you up to date who was whom and who was doing what to whom?

LA PORTA: There were a lot of Balkan watchers. We worked with the POLAD office in KFOR, the NATO command in Pristina. The POLAD office there had two officers. Sometimes they were Americans, sometimes not. They had a staff and access to people locally. By and large they did a good job of keeping up with the other diplomatic missions and serving as a channel for us in Naples and also for the POLAD in Brussels.

The question of Southern Serbia was a running problem in early 2001 through about early July. We had an American POLAD in the area, Sean Sullivan, and his deputy who was a U.S. navy lieutenant commander, Wayne Porter, who were intimately engaged in negotiations with the Albanian and Serb factions to get a truce and some confidence building measures in place. Everything from building village roads and sinking new wells in remote villages, establishing a code of conduct for politicians, obtaining a better deal for Albanians in the local educational system, getting Albanians into the medical service were some of the things that were done.

Southern Serbia, or the Presavo Valley, was a precarious situation and there was great fear that the situation, which was aggravated by parties in Belgrade and exploited by some Albanian hypernationalists in Kosovo over the border, could have erupted into a general Balkan war. I think that it's to the credit of NATO diplomacy that that situation was not allowed to get worse.

The other issue of course was in Bosnia. While I wouldn't characterize the situation there as unstable, it was certainly fragile. Over the three years I was in Naples I sensed a progression in terms of increased confidence on the part of the ethnic communities in Bosnia toward each other and the BiH government after a series of national and local elections demonstrated that Bosnia-Herzegovina could indeed hang together. In Croatia, another area of concern, the question in 2001 is whether the radical Croat nationalists would "seize" the government legally or provoke a renewal of the conflict with Bosnia. That didn't happen either. I think there it was a case not so much of NATO active diplomacy, although certainly in Zagreb that was very important, but a kind of moral suasion. NATO and the EU combined to tell the Croatians that they had to behave, especially if they were to be accepted in the Partnership for Peace, which they wanted very much, and to gain legitimacy vis-ï¿½-vis Belgrade which was looking for any way it could to minimize or humiliate in some cases the elected government in Zagreb. This is the post-Tudjman government. We had close relations with the OSCE mission in Zagreb and kept in close contact with our embassy as well as SFOR, the NATO command in BiH. All of us worked on the government in Zagreb to play it straight and helped it to mature.

Q: I was just thinking that you were blessed with having the Balkans and then those two firm friends Greece and Turkey to deal with. I was consul general in Naples back when Admiral Crowe was CINC and he would roll his eyes when you talked about Greece and Turkey. You know, when you think about the rest of Europe, I mean they settle things in marble halls and do things in a traditional way. As soon as you move into the Balkans and Greece and Turkey, here you've got people who are kind of allies at each other's throats.

LA PORTA: If I could just finish up with a footnote on the Balkans before going to that other Balkan country, Greece.

Q: I have to point out that I was consul general in Athens and I remarked to somebody, well, you know, Balkan justice referring to the Greeks, is not like the justice in the United States and it was a headline thing in the papers. The American consul general had called Greece a Balkan country.

LA PORTA: Well, you talk about Balkan justice today and CNN had a headline that I saw while eating lunch an hour or so ago, was the assassination of the sports editor of a newspaper, I believe it was in Athens, who apparently was responsible for collecting some evidence on Greek doping scandals during the Olympic games. Balkan justice was meted out to him.

Let me point out one small paradox. If you can believe it, the country that probably showed steady, not always consistent, improvement over the three years I was in Naples and since has, believe it or not, been Albania, as faction-ridden as that country is between the warlords, Sali Berisha and his rivals, and its very low economic base. I used to compare the level of development in Albania with the least developed parts of Indonesia. The Albanians managed to create several governments that did cooperate not only with their neighbors, but also within the coalitions they formed. They began to provide more better government than not.

They put a lot or the worst tendencies beside them, including corruption, and they have begun to do some very useful things militarily. They allowed NATO and U.S. forces to use Albania for training exercises en route to Iraq and Afghanistan. They have been extremely responsible in the kinds of diplomacy that they pursued in the region, including the tripartite relationship between Croatia, Albania and Macedonia, in trying to get more responsible governments together to look at issues of border security, transnational crime and a few other things. In a funny kind of way, Albania which during the decade of the '90s was driven by two periods of severe inter-ethnic conflict, they now are beginning to show signs of being respectable. Remarkable.

Q: I take it Slovenia was a rather benign spot, was it?

LA PORTA: Slovenia was benign, but they also took pains until about the middle of last year not to involve themselves very much in the former Yugoslavia, as the people who considered themselves the most Western, closest to Italy and sophisticated. That is how they viewed themselves, calling Slovenia the Alps of Southern Europe and looking northward and westward as opposed to southward. The place where they have recently come into trouble with some of their neighbors has been the revival of some territorially inconsequential border issues with Croatia. I don't know why, and I'm not an expert in this area, it was pandering to some domestic hardline sentiment or just simply out of spite that they decided to revive some of these arguments, but it seems to me that if NATO and the EU combined to sit the two down, lock them in a room and come out with an agreement that will be binding to settle these minor disputes, they could probably do it.

Q: Let's talk before we move to the broader picture, the squabbling NATO allies.

LA PORTA: Not having served in Athens, but having served in Turkey, one of the things we always used to say is don't forget that hysteria is a Greek word.

Q: I'll agree with you.

LA PORTA: From the NATO command standpoint you're exactly right, whether it was commanders like Admiral Crowe or more recent ones, you could always count on these two allies behaving badly and consuming inordinate amounts of time of very senior people in NATO. The only, let me put it this way, I think there are a few good ways of getting beyond the history of challenge and response, like two teenagers who continually are needling each other and cannot find it possible to behave in a civil way toward each other. These two countries still have not grown out of their adolescence in the modern era.

One of the things that I felt that was consequential in terms of NATO attitudes vis-ï¿½-vis both Greece and Turkey was really developments in Afghanistan, Iraq and in other places in the Middle East. I argued both in Naples and in Brussels, and even in Washington, that it was time for NATO to adopt a mature alliance policy on the two rivals. This couldn't be done at the regional command level, but needs to be said to both Greece and Turkey, look, we've got more important business than to tend to your disputes over air space, ostensible rearming of one or another Greek island off the coast of Turkey, or some other dispute concerning transit of ships or aircraft. Until you guys figure out that you really want to adopt a more mature approacmature probably wasn't the word we want to use but something like thathen NATO is not going to consider using any of the locations in your countries for exercises, training or other purposes. In other words, if they are not willing to fulfill their obligations as allies, then some of the political and tangible benefits can be withdrawn or held in abeyance.

They did begin to get a little of that message, especially as the Iraq conflict was warming up. The Greeks found ways to distinguish themselves from the Turks over develop the "second front" in Northern Iraq and moving supplies and forces through Turkish territory. The Greeks decided to play ball and put a lot of the command and control arguments behind them. They allowed NATO forces to do some training in Greek waters and to use the bases in Crete for counter terrorism operations and for maritime interdiction. We were able to make very good use of those training opportunities.

Q: Maritime interdiction was a major naval counter-terrorism program in the wake of 9/11. Could you briefly describe the program and what success it might have had?

LA PORTA: For NATO, maritime interdiction and surveillance in the Mediterranean were call Operation Endeavour. It had two parts: providing surveillance and security for U.S. and allied ships passing through the Strait of Gibraltar and other tight waterways; and detecting and stopping ships, mainly in the eastern Mediterranean, suspected of carrying contraband such as missile parts, things that could be used to develop nuclear and biological weapons, and the like. Operation Endeavour was highly successful, secured wide support in NATO and was a highly visible counter-terrorism deterrento the extent that the French showed up and volunteered ships for it.

Q: Souda Bay and other places. For a long time there had been very good training and then they under the socialist government.

LA PORTA: Socialist government, Papadopoulos' son, Nikos Papadopoulos.

Q: What about while you were there was Greece causing any problems vis-ï¿½-vis Macedonia or the former Republic of Macedonia?

LA PORTA: FYROM, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. When you referred to it in NATO the parlance you had to use those words by Greek insistence; in international fora they were known as FYROM rather than simply Macedonia. Yes, the Greeks never let an opportunity go by when they didn't remind you of their complaint with the Macedonians about the name of their country. There again it's a matter of let's grow up rather than a question of false nationalistic pride, pure and simple. In FYROM/Macedonia today you have some of the best preserved Greek Orthodox churches, ruins and artifacts. In fact there were a considerable number of Macedonian pieces in the series of exhibitions on Orthodox religion that was at the New York Metropolitan Museum last year. The things there are truly remarkable and the government in Skopje has taken great pains to preserve them.

The recent Turkish problems that we had vis-ï¿½-vis Iraq truly constitute a blunder in U.S. diplomacy. I've said that many people whom I tend to admire, like Paul Wolfowitz and Marc Grossman who were the two people in the United States government most conversant with Turkish affairs, botched it so badly in the run-up to the Iraq conflict. Although those individuals jointly and individually made virtually monthly visits to Ankara to try to get Turkey to come around to some kind of agreement on using Southern Turkey as a conduit for troops as well as supplies and other things into the North and also to put some limits on the potential bad behavior of the Kurds. This would have been in Ankara's interest but we failed to secure that agreement. On the basis of my contacts in Ankara, both on the U.S. and Turkish sides, Washington simply didn't understand what the Turks required in terms of assurances, more than assurances, guarantees that they were going to benefit from the situation in the post-conflict environment.

For example, the 1991 Persian Gulf War resulted in a huge outpouring of Kurdish refugees from the North across the border into Turkey. There were reasons for that, but basically the international effort to contain and mitigate the plight of those people cost a few billion dollars along the way. The Turks rightly so didn't want that to happen again, yet nothing that the United States could do could give them assurances that wasn't going to happen. Likewise, Washington found it impossible to give a guarantee that the Kurds would not eventually go their own way and have some kind of independent or excessively autonomist status within Iraq. We could not find a way to bridge that gap. Beyond the political realm we wouldn't even give them assurances that the Turks would get a cut of the military supply business, construction and other things in Iraq that we ourselves could not do well.

Q: You know, you were following this and I was just actually looking at newspapers, I got the feeling that part of the problem was that you had a new Turkish government, more of an Islamist government that you've had before, but a secular Islamist government and all and sort of voting against helping the United States is kind of a way of cutting its teeth and it required a little more time to say, okay, you got that out of your system, now let's talk Turkey or something like that.

LA PORTA: Literally and figuratively. I think that's correct, but I think there was also a fourth fundamental misunderstanding in addition to the ones I've listed. We did not understand clearly what was happening on the political side within Turkey. The Turkish General Staff (TGS), no matter how long we negotiated with them or thought we were negotiating with them, really was passing the buck to the new government of Tayyip Erdogan as a litmus test on whether that government was gong to measure up in pursuing Turkey's national interests as the TGS defined them.

Q: As opposed to being more Islamist.

LA PORTA: Exactly. We didn't understand that it was too late by the middle of January 2003 that we had to start writing down these understandings and guarantees, unlike the Gulf War in 1991-92 when a lot of assumptions made, but the United States was seen by the Turks and others not to deliver. Secondarily, I think that we didn't understand what the Turkish General Staff was trying to do politically, that was basically to put the monkey on the back of the civilian parliament to sanction their role as a NATO member in the Iraq conflict.

Q: The Turkish General Staff is doing this and you're NATO SOUTH, I would think that TGS would say, hey fellows to the admiral and to you and all this is what we're doing, go back to your State Department, Department of Defense and explain what we're doing.

LA PORTA: I don't recall whether they made it that explicit although I think that there were some people in the Turkish General Staff who had closer contacts with high ranking American military officers who said that. On the other hand, Washington basically tried to get away with the argument that was clearly inadequate that you, our allies, have an obligation to do things for us and, by the way, don't forget all the things that the United States has done for Turkey over the years. It wasn't enough. I don't think that the specificity and degree of understanding or knowledge on the part of our top people was adequate, based on looking at correspondence, records of meetings and reports from Washington as well as reporting from the field in that pre-Iraq conflict period.

Q: I may be showing a prejudice or a bias or something, but from what you're saying I feel a couple of things all over of Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz who was very impatient and had taken the State Department almost out of the picture and were pressing ahead and everything was in a hurry and they knew best. Were you getting that feeling in Naples?

LA PORTA: There was no question about that, but in the Turkish situation there was a fundamental miscalculation in terms of how we chose to deploy our forces. We had ships laden with logistical supplies and later on, just before the onset of hostilities, with troops sitting off the coast of Southern Turkey for four months. Our commanders were distraught from day to day at not getting anywhere on the Turkish problem. I believe it was the result of fundamental understanding in Washington as to what the Turks really required.

Q: I mean here you are sitting as the political advisor to, as I take it although this is done out of CENTCOM, essentially this was NATO SOUTH troops and all that, what were you all doing on this?

LA PORTA: In a technical sense there were a couple of things that were our responsibility, not CENTCOM's. Number one, NATO did set up a defensive command because they weren't going to allow troops and other things to transit Turkey. That command, after some negotiations which really weren't all that painful, was set up in Southern Turkey at Izmir and Incirlik Air Base. NATO did insert air defense batteries and we deployed AWACS aircraft to surveil the battle space over Southern Turkey in defense of allied territory. And the Turks appreciated although they welshed out on their large alliance obligations.

Q: Who was the enemy?

LA PORTA: The expectation was there could have been an adventure by some Iraqi armed forces or the use of weapons of mass destruction of some sort against, if not Turkish territory, against the Kurds in the North. There were also concerns about potential Russian reactions to the onset of hostilities. The Russians were making threatening noises, as were the Iranians, about taking over some territory. The Russians were going to send "humanitarian forces" from Russia to take a role in the situation. Then the Iranians were clearly supporting the Ansar al-Islam, which was holed up in extreme eastern Kurdistan, but still adjoining Turkey. There were a few things out there, not to mention the security of the pipelines that ran through Southern Turkey. But NATO did stand up a command that was largely air defense. It was a multinational command, and it took a lot of negotiations with the Turks to figure out where to put in the communication centers and other things. What the whole escapade showed, in my view, was that the U.S. political miscalculation revealed fault lines between a number of important relationships in the region.

Q: Before we move to the Iraq War, I'd like to check out something before Osama Bin Laden attacking the World Trade Center on 9/11/01. You got there just about the time the Bush II administration came into power and there were a series of moves which almost right away set the stage for unhappiness on the part of many people in NATO, "old" Europe and all that, missile defense, and not signing the International Criminal Court statute. Anyway, I mean most of these moves seemed to be the United States was repudiating many of its past stands as far as being one and going great unilaterally into things. I mean were you picking this up or was this a difficult time?

LA PORTA: I think it was. The whole souring of the relationships with the various allies of "old" Europe was a continuing phenomenon. From the NATO perspective it was borne out of a certain amount of frustration as for the most part the NATO forces were not modernizing to the degree that the United States thought was necessary to make them fully combat capable. We're seeing this right now in Iraq and in terms of some coalition contributions in Afghanistan.

The second thing is that the European countries over the decade of the '90s had not made the kind of investments in upgrading their capabilities, for example, in long range air, combat surveillance systems or intelligence gathering and many other ways that would have allowed them to minimally keep pace with the United States. So by the time of the George W. Bush administration there was already a climate of non-performance, if you will, on the part of the NATO allies.

The third thing that I think was important, and a number of writers like Robert Kagan have been very forceful if not brilliant in pointing this out, is the growth of a European identity and mentality that is very much at odds with the United States. There is a growing estrangement in tone and substance of the development of an EU or European system that looks toward increasing laws, heavy regulation, heavy protection of social systems and rights, and heavy taxation. This occurred during the Reagan and Bush I administrations and is still continuing into the Clinton administration. The United States is moving in a very different way toward liberalization, deregulation, toward at least until recently, fiscal responsibility, debt reduction, liberalization of trade, etc. The Europeans, it became apparent by 2000 and 2001, had moved very heavily in exactly the opposite directions. Today you have very different societies, not irreconcilable, but they certainly look a lot different.

Q: Did you find a developing visceral dislike for Bush or did that take the Iraq War?

LA PORTA: I think that had begun before the Iraq War. In fact I think it began right after 9/11 with the "axis of evil" and the cowboy mentality that even had some negative reactions within the United States. I think that the Quadrennial Defense Review with its strategic doctrine, declaration of preemptive warfare, putting things out there in very stark reality, black and white, are you with us or against uEuropeans have found all of that grating and highly offensive. It's more than style. It's more than cowboyism at its worst, but these symptoms underlay a deeper division between where Europe was headed and where the United States was headed.

Personally I was not happy in most respects with our diplomacy in Brussels, both in the EU and in NATO. In the beginning we tried in traditional ways to bring people together and to paper over the differences, or to find cosmetic ways of dealing with some of these very different or divergent patterns. In the EU in particular, there was a total lack of candor. In the G-8 process as well on the economic side there was always a willingness of the United States to do those things that were of benefit to us, but not to pay much attention to what any of the other seven were interested in. There was a failure in the EU to really talk, as well as in the OECD to some extent, candidly about the economic differences, really draw them out, seek solutions, for example, on the question of subsidies. Year after year we tolerated the different abuses of subsidies which was akin to substance abuse; you're talking about subsidies abuse. We abuse, they abuse, but we abuse in different ways and we never really deal with the fundamental problem. We allowed this to go on and never really dealt with the underlying problems of how are we going to identify common interests in order to focus on something better than the systems that we now have where things are just getting worse.

In NATO I felt that the Bush administration decided from the beginning that they weren't going to try hard to deal with the allies. Consequently our mission in Brussels, Nick Burns and before him Sandy (Alexander) Vershbow were always left with a weak hand. They didn't have the authority to really go in there and get some agreements on defense policy or on other things. I think that the strong language that has been used by Washington simply made things worse without an effort to help things get better.

Q: You were saying, here's what we can do.

LA PORTA: No, we never really entered a real negotiating situation. We would go into defense planning committee meetings or meetings on the ministerial level of one kind or another and we'd put our views on the table. We'd make a strong speech, usually backed up by the NATO Secretary General who was very much on our side. George Robertson was probably more American in his approach on NATO defense matters than anybody in Washington. Yet we never really took those issues down to a level where governments could focus on them in concrete ways. We lectured, we hectored, we abused and that eventually got nowhere. You just wound up turning off any friends you had in these governments.

Q: I come away looking at sort of the major picture that as the European Union has developed particularly Germany and France, that the United States has world interests and Europe essentially has obviously European interests and different economic interests and trying to make a buck here or there, and not being terribly worried about who is supplying the money.

LA PORTA: The European abuses were abominable. Yet many of the things that are beginning to come to light and many of the things have not yet come to light have been known for years. For example, the French support of the Iraqi military, bribing everybody in sight in Baghdad, and being party to Saddam Hussein's scams over the years. We never blew the whistle on them. This is so characteristic of the way we've inadequately dealt with bad people like Saddam Hussein or terrorist threats. We have covered up and we've lurched from incident to incident. We've not dealt with the underlying issues. We knew that Iraq was learning nuclear technology for decades and never did anything about it. We know that the North Koreans have been engaged in every kind of transnational criminal activity that you can imagine, but yet over the years nothing had been done about it.

Eventually you pay for inaction or turning a blind eye for political or whatever other kinds of reasons or just simply sometimes because a job is too hard. Now, and this may be an ultra realist point of view, when it comes to terrorism one of the messages that we have pretty much unsuccessfully tried to send in the United Nations and NATO that it's time that this kind of neglectful behavior has to stop. The international community has to do things together, not separately, while Washington is currently talking unilaterally. You have to do things together to begin to deal with the aspects of the problem, whether it's law enforcement, intelligence, coordination or development of multilateral and other kinds of institutions. I firmly believe that we have not made use of NATO to fulfill legitimate U.S. interests in these areas. The current attitude within the administration is well, we're not going to deal with NATO because it's too hard or because we'll just into a current unsatisfactory fight with the French. This is the wrong attitude. I think you have to go in and find ways of doing even if that means finding a new consensus on a new decision making procedure or simply not allowing the French to stand in our way.

Q: Did you feel that you were getting. I mean in the first place did you feel you were almost in, I won't say in an enemy camp, but you were a State Department officer with your Secretary of State being Colin Powell and you're in a military command with a Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and they seem to have been on divergent tracks for a long time with Rumsfeld winning almost every round. Did you get that feeling?

LA PORTA: There's no question that the senior commanders that I knew, whether in Brussels or in Naples, were appalled and in some cases despondent over a lot of the attitudes and directives that came out of Washington from Rumsfeld in particular. The U.S. military, going back to the end of World War II, had become accustomed to operating in alliances and coalitions. When they saw this unilateralism come along and DOD's civilian bureaucracy in Washington trumping military advice at every turn, any smart commander is not going to be very happy with that situation. Whether you consider strong civilian leadership is a plus or it just further erodes our military capabilities when you have a system when the advice of senior military commanders is consistently rejected, no matter how some of them try to cover up, you don't have a good situation for the best direction of your forces and when you use them.

With regard to the French, the French policy adjustment in Iraq, as distinct from its tolerance in Afghanistan and willingness to interact with NATO forces, for example, in patrolling in the Mediterranean against terrorism, took on a different form with Chirac's election in the middle of 2002. At that time Colin Powell was the Secretary of State and it was clear that Chirac in his own head or with the urging of advisors decided now that Chirac had rid himself of the governing condominium with the Socialists, it was time to pursue Gaullism to its logical consequence. This was parallel change with the United States pursuing more unilateralist policies. So Chirac decided that now is the time to establish the leadership of France in a unifying Europe where it could A) dominate Germany because of the innate weakness of the feckless and ineffective Schroeder administration with the Greens in his government, B) playing off the Brits against the United States, and C) driving through to assume total dominance of the EU and of European security and defense policy. In other words, the French were pursuing the embodiment of the force de frappe of de Gaulle in having an independent Europe with Eurocentric armed defense. I think our people missed it because we were so consumed with pursuing our own policies, or perhaps we saw it and we didn't understand what was happening.

I think that the failure of this is going to be really the end of Trans Atlanticism as we saw it develop through the '50s and '60s and became to be comfortable with in the '70s and '80s and into the '90s until the fall of the Soviet Union. The people who are now advocating a kind of the reforging of a Transatlantic Alliance to heal the breaches are not getting terribly far in the current climate in Washington.

Q: How did you find the influence of France in the NATO headquarters.

LA PORTA: One word, insidious.

Q: Okay.

LA PORTA: The reason I say that is the French substantially increased their unilateral contributions to the NATO military staffs, combat and other operations. The French have always held back but they have lulled NATO into a sense of false security by providing officers, or offering to pick up parts of the responsibility for NATO operations that were really of importance to them.

For example, our command in Naples was responsible for conducting Operation Active Endeavor in the Eastern Mediterranean. Active Endeavor was a counter terrorist maritime interdiction force that tracked civilian shipping for nefarious activity. It also was a means of deploying a defensive task force in the Eastern Mediterranean to anchor that strategic region while U.S. and coalition forces were in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. After operation Active Endeavor was deployed by agreement of the Defense Policy Committee, not the NATO Council where the French could have interposed their objection. Active Endeavor became a living and breathing thing. It had a command and control structure, it interoperated, it gathered in forces of not only the United States and Britain, but also German and other forces. A couple of Scandinavians came in and even the Swedes came down to interoperate as a PFP country.

Q: PFP?

LA PORTA: Sweden was a Partnership for Peace country. There were also contributions from the Greeks and the Turks in this task force. The number of forces in composition of the forces we had was changing and then every two months AFNORTH deployed a naval task force into Eastern Mediterranean to relieve the Southern region force which came back for refitting and training. Then the Northern Europe force backed out and so forth. This was the kind of operating system we had. It was very effective and today it is very effective.

The French woke up after about two months of this and they said there's something happening here and we're not part of it. All of a sudden the French announced that they were going to send two ships to interoperate with Operation Active Endeavor in the Eastern Mediterranean. What's going on here? Are they just out to collect data on what NATO was doing? Yes. Or are they contributing something by conducting their own patrolling patterns, reporting data and so forth? Yes, too. Obviously the French considered it in their interest to be part of this operation. I had French officers working in the POLAD office in Naples, constantly through the period, and they were a very good office. One of the graduates of the POLAD office in Naples went on to Fort Leavenworth to Command and General Staff College where the French have one billet each year; now that officer is assigned here in Washington as the assistant defense attachï¿½ in the French Embassy. I'm proud to say that I had a hand in training him for pol/mil work. The French officers were very good. Whether they reported to their government or to the foreign ministry or whomever on what we were doing in the POLAD office, because I tried to do everything in a transparent way. We had control of compartmented intelligence and military cable traffic so that wasn't an issue. The French will play when its in their interest to play. A year and a half ago the French hosted a major naval conference that NATO conducts every year, the subject of which was maritime patrolling and counter terrorism. It was a little unseemly that this conference should be held in Nice, but it was a nice place to do that.

Q: Okay, well, what about how did the attack on the United States by Al Qaeda and all the subsequent move to Afghanistan affect what you were up to?

LA PORTA: From the U.S. Naval Forces in Europe standpoint we were a supporting command, therefore it was our job to get the forces through the Strait of Gibraltar or through airfields in our region and get them to where they needed to be, whether in Central Asia or elsewhere. We did not have a command and control responsibility, so our job as a supporting command was to monitor those activities and be an "enabler" in order to get those forces to CENTCOM. In the NATO context we kept what the British would call a "watching brief" on developments in Afghanistan because to the extent there were problems that engaged NATO forces. There were air forces that went through Northern Europe or NATO AWACS involved were coming out of Holland. Operation Active Endeavor was a defensive response to counter terrorism and NATO was a full-fledged operator in the maritime area.

We did some planning in the POLAD office. We were asked by Admiral Johnson to figure out that, if NATO did take a role in Afghanistan, what might that be? How might that be constructed? What kind of command and control arrangements would be appropriate and how Southern region interests would be affected. I had an officer on my staff who quickly got very smart about Afghanistan and Iraq; he was also the officer who handled our Greek and Turk problems. During the post 9/11 period we had to become a lot more expert on terrorism and WMD; my British officer became the WMD guy and he had to know a lot more about chemical warfare and other things. One of the things that we did from the POLAD office was to sponsor small meetings within the command like seminars. We brought down a British WMD expert from London to talk about chemical, biological, and nuclear warfare. We did half-day seminar to educate our senior commanders on the issues, terminology, etc. We had another program on counter terrorism and we had a seminar for the command on the rule of law. We brought in an expert, who had good Balkan credentials, about the ins and outs of legal reform because NATO troops supported in terms of transition in the Balkans.

One other thing that I was very pleased with was that we linked up with CSIS here in Washington, Dthe Center for Strategic and International Studies that is headed by Dr. John Hamry. John Hamry was deputy secretary of defense during the Clinton administration and was a good friend of Admiral Johnson's. We worked with Simon Serfaty of CSIS to run a two-day conference in Naples for military commanders from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, people from NATO and our usual Southern region allies on challenges to this Southern region from transnational threats.

The POLAD office was engaged in two very distinct, I think successful, planning exercises. First of all we did a study that began under Admiral Ellis and was continued under Admiral Johnson on how to tailor NATO's mission in the Balkans and to get the right mix of military forces, what missions these forces should have, and what kind of command and control structure. Everybody was looking for an "exit strategy" and ways of winding down the U.S. components of NATO forces in the Balkans. That became a particularly strident theme under Donald Rumsfeld and we were under real pressure to do something. We did what was called a joint operations area review, JOA review, in which a small team of military officers, including one U.S. naval reserve officer, came up with a model for assessing the on the ground situations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and to some extent Albania in terms of NATO missions and forces. This JOA review was later adopted as NATO policy and become the planning instrument used by Brussels annually for the NATO council. What started out as an internal exercise later was absorbed into NATO as the planning methodology.

The second thing I was very pleased with was a geographic strategy for the Southern region. This was done by a retired Foreign Service Officer who was married to the management counselor in Rome. Richard A. Smith was his name and he had a lot of NATO experience. I knew that Ras Smith, when I could tear him away from the tennis court, would turn out a good job intellectually in outlining what NATO's interests were in the breadth of the Southern region. We had to consider not only the military threats, but also cultural, religious and other kinds of diversity and major NATO programs like the Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue and other instruments. This regional engagement review became the policy to guide how our command looked at the rest of the region and defined relations with our Northern sister command in Holland. We were able to achieve some changes and the kinds of things that we did.

Q: Were you concerned, I mean you were sitting and overlooking the Mediterranean at the time it was becoming an increasing flood of North Africans, mostly young males from Algeria, from parts of Africa, Libya, Morocco, you name it, up into Southern Europe and all, including Italy. These are having already having profound impacts on certainly on France and I imagine on Italy and Spain. These are almost all illegal people coming in. What were you doing about or concerned about it?

LA PORTA: Yes, illegal migration was a great point of concern, in the operational sense in terms of boatloads of people headed for Southern Europe, NATO having to work occasionally to rescue them, or having to deal with criminal phenomena that resulted from that activity. One of the things that we looked at in the regional strategy was the impact of illegal transnational activity of all sorts, whether trafficking in persons like refugees or prostitution, or smuggling of weapons, money laundering and other kinds of contraband. Our thesis was, and I think still is today, that all of these kinds of illegality whether in the Balkans, Mediterranean Basin, or pointed at Europe from Northern Africa, Central Europe or Russia, are convenient hosts for terrorism. In other words, terrorism rides on the back of these kinds of phenomena and provide very convenient ways for terrorists to insert themselves in ways that are inimical to the security interests of the United States or of NATO. So, it was our basic approach and you had to take a multifaceted approach not only in military means, but also law enforcement and intelligence. Other instruments had to be brought to bear.

Through the Mediterranean Dialogue NATO in the Southern region had a clear and present means to engage with exactly this kind of activity. For two years in a row, at POLAD office instigation, Admiral Johnson hosted meetings of senior military and other policy people from the Mediterranean Dialogue countries which as I said ran from Israel to North Africa, but excluding Libya. With representatives from the alliance countries, we began to try to enhance military cooperation and connectivity among the law enforcement, maritime patrolling and other kinds of establishments. There's a long way to go in this area and there are very distinct national differences in one or another of the North African countries.

On the European side, some believe that the Europeans still are unsuccessful in grasping this phenomenon and pressure from the South whether it's in refugees or illegal activity and whatnot. They're in a state of denial, they don't want to do anything because these people are not white, not Christian, not like us. The French in particular have had their traumas over assimilating the outflow of populations from the Algerian wars. The Germans have had their own national difficulties in assimilating the influx of Turkish guest laborers and other people from Eastern countries over the decades. In Italy well, the problem is all around you, but so far the Italians can't bring themselves to do anything except turn boats away when they can. There are very few legal and social mechanisms to deal with those kinds of issues. The Spanish likewise are hung up over alien populations, not in the least because of the threat of terrorism and the concern that they could combine forces with the ETA, the Basque terrorists.

What we tried to get people to understand was that in terms of enforcement, all law enforcement, intelligence military patrolling and other kinds of activity, hang of a piece. In other words, there is nothing that is purely EU, there is nothing that is purely NATO, but they all go together whether it's Interpol or other kinds of law enforcement coordination. Europe will not be able to manage the problem of illegal migration, just as the United States cannot manage the problem of illegal migration, until they understand that this is a phenomenon that is not going to stop. Once you understand that intellectually, you can say, what can we do to mitigate the problem? The paradox is that, like the United States, all of these European countries need immigrant labor to keep their industries going and keep their national economies afloat because of aging populations, or in some cases regional dislocations. There is insufficient farm labor in the South of Italy to harvest the crops of grapes, olives, or wheat and other things because parts of Southern Italy have become depopulated and nobody wants to do that kind of work anymore. Similarly in the United States there isn't a restaurant that doesn't survive on migrant labor from Central America and Mexico. You can't pick the crops or run businesses in the Western part of the United States without migrant labor. That's become a phenomenon in Chicago, New York and even the Washington area. You wouldn't get houses built if you didn't have Salvadorans.

Q: The language of construction is Spanish in the Washington area.

LA PORTA: I can tell you I had a bunch of masons at work on my house recently who didn't speak very much English at all. The point is that until governments say okay, we recognize the inevitability that people are going to move from less fortunate areas to more fortunate areas for whatever economic or other reason. There are quids that Europeans could employ in order to get the goodwill and cooperation of the North African states in managing this kind of activity as opposed to doing nothing at all and in some cases corruption to facilitate it.

Q: Was this something you kind of watched, the watching brief, but except for safety at sea or something, was this sort of beyond you?

LA PORTA: The accumulation of concern among the NATO allies is overdue and I don't think it's yet gotten to the point of actionability. For example, under the EU's Barcelona Process, which is what they call their Mediterranean Dialogue with the North and other African states, it would be possible to cut a deal with those governments and say we need your help in law enforcement to control illegal migration and transnational criminal activities. In exchange for that we will create an orderly legal worker migration program targeted to economic needs of our societies. Let's get the right kind of people and give those people the opportunity to migrate and work in Europe under a certain set of conditions, but in order to do that we need the cooperation of the African states and some in the Middle East to exercise sufficient control and do what's necessary to staunch some of this illegal activity. Nobody has come to this point of entertaining that kind of "grand bargain."

Q: One last question. You know the French and sometimes the Germans, but particularly it's always the French who are pushing through this idea of having a European military as opposed to a NATO military. How was that treated during the time you were there?

LA PORTA: Badly and inadequately. I don't think that anybody really realized the implications of that, had the administration here in Washington not been so intent on pursuing its unilateralist agenda. This allowed the Europeans to pursue their own independent defense agenda. Washington should have worked with Britain, the Scandinavians and several others to inhibit an independent European force under what they call ESDP. I think it is just terribly debilitating because by having its own European defense capability under ESDP the Europeans themselves are just simply going to become content with the mediocrity, inadequate readiness and incapable armed forces. In other words they're going to start looking like the armed forces of the second and third rate countries around the world.

Q: Another Latin America.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. I think that this is an area that this administration and the Defense Department has let go by erroneously. Some in the administration have said that it's about time the Europeans took responsibility for their own defense. My view is very different in that you can go down that track at the price of knowing that the NATO alliance forces will be degraded and NATO capabilities will suffer. Secondly, you can be sure that, whatever the occasion is to use forces, U.S. reintervention will be required to bail them out. Indeed that is already happening. In Africa where when the French decided under a vague EU mandate to intervene in the Congo's border war in Central Africa, they didn't have the capabilities to get there and the U.S. provided airlift for them. We were also providing airlift for the OAU forces to go into Darfur in the Sudan.

Q: Well, we're just about at the end here. You retired. What have you been up to since you retired in 2003?

LA PORTA: I worked for a couple of months on a study for PM Bureau on the deployment of POLADs around the world. Also, there are some implications for the State-Defense exchange program. Then I began in the very beginning of 2004 an association with the United States-Indonesian Society (USINDO) which is an NGO designed to improve awareness of United States-Indonesia policy issues and promote a greater awareness of Indonesia in the United States.

Q: Okay, well, Al, I thank you very much. You've gone a long way.

EPILOGUE

I am sure that everyone who does an oral history says that it is difficult to write a valedictory on one's career of any considerable duration. I am no different in that respect.

At the time I was being interviewed by Stuart Kennedy, I was serving as president of the United States-Indonesia Society, or USINDO. I remained in that position for nearly four years, resigning at the end of November 2007. Leaving USINDO was not my choice but there were differences in the vision for the Society: whether it should be more or less program-oriented; that it was becoming too "activist" in working with the Indonesians on congressional relations and other matters; and whether there should be more emphasis on income-earning activities to improve the investment base and long-term viability of the organization. Suffice to say that my viewpro-program, more pro-active and income diversificatiowere not fully shared by the chairman although they were supported by most members.

All that is behind me now. I still fully support USINDO's objectives and remain an ordinary member. What is important is for the United States to have a positive and accurate perspective on Indonesia and to take the right policy actions. I have recently had articles published on policy recommendations for Indonesia and Southeast Asia and I will not repeat them here. Nonetheless, Southeast Asia and Indonesia remain under-rated areas in U.S. policy and it is hoped, as I write this, that there will be improvement in the next administration, just as there has been some improvement in the last four years of the Bush Administration.

Since November 2007, thrust onto the job and NGO market, I have done a variety of things: policy writing (on Indonesia, ASEAN, Mongolia and political-military subjects such as the role of POLADs), project work with think tanks such as CSIS in Washington, a small amount of business advising, public speaking and helping to organize a major Mongolian cultural and business festival in my wife's home town, Middletown, Ohio. And in November 2008, I accepted a consultancy with a large development aid organization, DAI (Development Alternatives International), to work on a project to advise the new foreign affairs ministry in Kosovo. Under a USAID contract funded by the State Department, the purpose of my project team (I am chief of party) is to help the ministry in capacity-building, policy development, management and creating a Foreign Service.

These activities have been extensions of my Foreign Service career, collecting honoraria here and there, but are based on doing what I know best, not launching out into a wildly different field. At the base of it is the "service" part of the Foreign Service. As we know, no one joins the Foreign Service to get rich; in fact most Foreign Service officers are lucky to break even or are disadvantaged in comparison to other career possibilities, not to mention the sacrifices of spouses and even children. Foreign affairs expertise is one thing, but there is a fundamental obligation on the part of the Foreign Service and the Department of State that is often ignored or subliminatethat is the responsibility to provide for employee and family welfare.

At present, my spouse is beginning an AAFSW effort to focus on the needs of "left-behind" families as their Foreign Service members serve in increasing numbers in Iraq, Afghanistan and other high risk environments. AFSA should energetically join in this effort (but may not) and it is hoped that the outcomes and recommendations of this study can draw the attention of State's management. The fact remains, however, that employees and their families are being short-changed by the Department's niggardliness regarding family allowances, travel restrictions, inadequate housing and other conditions of employment. To have an effective diplomacy, moreover an "expeditionary" or "transformational" Foreign Service as propounded by Condi Rice and others, it is necessary for the Department, whatever administration is in power and the Congress to make a greater investment in people, enabling Foreign Service personnel to do their jobs better, take the risks that are being demanded and to provide more effectively for spouse and family needs.

As I have written (Foreign Service Journal, April 2008), it is absolutely necessary to increase the size of the Foreign Service to make up for the devastating personnel cuts of the decade of the 90's, serious dislocations in the numbers of officers at various grades, underpowered Senior Foreign Service ranks, and shortcomings in infrastructural and administrative support. No wonder that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, the best advocate for the Foreign Service (not Secretary Rice), is worrying about the militarization of foreign policy, the inability of the State Department to perform overseas, and serious policy-making shortfalls. DOD has the ability to "surge" and fill these gaps in many cases, while the Department has no "flex" and is falling behind in responsiveness, adaptability, capability to come up with new ideas and options and innovation. We need to correct the human support deficiencies in order to correct the policy dysfunctions and shortcomings, otherwise the Foreign Service will be gobbled up in a new Goldwater-Nickles Acas propounded by allies of the incoming administratioto make foreign relations the first order of business of the military and security structure.

By definition, Foreign Service Officers and all in the Foreign Service are "purple suiters" who are multi-taskers, lateral thinkers and are experientially nimble. To maintain this edge and to improve on Foreign Service and Department capabilities, resources, forward-thinking leadership and a responsive bureaucracy are needed to make changes that have been resisted in the Department for decades. I feel the frustrations of many worthy colleagues like Bill De Pree, Chas. Freeman and many others who see the need for forward change, not defending the status quo or carping with allies in the Department leadership over perceived inadequacies or biases. The Foreign Service, including its employee organizations, must maturely accept reality and work for great improvements to put the Service and the Department on a new footing. End of homily.

It has been a distinct privilege to work with ADST and Stuart Kennedy on this oral history and I beg their forbearance for the length of time it has taken me to complete this work.

Alphonse F. La PortaDecember 21, 2008

End of interview