The Association for Diplomatic Studies and TrainingForeign Affairs Oral History Project

RONALD J. NEITZKE

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the first of December, 2006. This is an interview with Ron Neitzke. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Alright. Ron, we will start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

NEITZKE: March 19, 1949, in Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. It's a town of seven or eight thousand about 200 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.

Q: 1949. Okay, well let us talk about the Neitzkes. Where did the Neitzkes come from and how did they end up in the northern reaches of the United States?

NEITZKE: The name is German. Family lore has it that it came from east of Berlin, in what was then, when my great-grandfather Frank Neitzke left, Prussia. Growing up, we were told that he'd left for America in the 1870s to avoid conscription into the Kaiser's army. His wife's family came to this country at least a generation or two earlier, probably also from Germany. My other paternal great-grandparents came from Luxembourg and the Rhineland, respectively, also around the 1870s.

Frank apparently first made his way to Buffalo, New York, stayed there at least long enough to get married, and then headed west to Minnesota, to homestead. Why he chose northern Minnesota, whether he had kinship or other ties there, or whether he just fell in with the large numbers of German and Scandinavian immigrants heading to that part of the country in those years, I don't know.

Q: What did he do for a living?

NEITZKE: He was a carpenter. He spent most of his life building houses in my home town.

Q: Was there much discussion of family history when you were growing up?

NEITZKE: Very little. Whether that's typically Midwestern, or typically German-American - given Germany's image from the two World Wars - or just something about my family, I'm not sure. My sense, though, is that these original immigrants, my great-grandparents mainly, weren't all that interested in looking back or maintaining ties with the old country.

Q: Well tell me about your grandparents on your father's side. Do you know what kind of work your grandfather did?

NEITZKE: Robert and Kate, Katherine, Neitzke. They had seven children, two of whom died young of the largely untreatable diseases that periodically swept through the population back then. Kate and Robert could both speak German but apparently did so only when it was necessary to keep something secret from their kids. Kate also translated letters from Germany that friends and neighbors brought to her. But my dad and his brothers spoke no German at all. For most of his adult life, my grandfather owned and ran what was called a recreation, a pool hall basically.

Q: Did your father go to college?

NEITZKE: My dad was the oldest of the five surviving children, all male. No Neitzke in his line had ever attended college. My dad was determined to go, and did go, but only for a year. He did well and wanted to continue but couldn't. It was the Depression. Money was tight, and, as he told it, he got no help or encouragement, to stay in college that is, from his father. My dad also lost the on-campus job he'd had his freshman year, in part, he felt, because of his religion. He was Catholic, and there were undercurrents of anti-Catholicism in that part of the country then. So he went out to California and worked for several years to earn money for college. But when Pearl Harbor was attacked, he enlisted right away. Then later, when he got out of the Navy, he already had a wife and baby son, so going back to school would have been difficult.

Q: What do you know about your mother's background, her family?

NEITZKE: Even less, unfortunately. My mom was adopted by a Danish-American couple shortly after her birth in Minneapolis in 1918. They owned a hardware store and later a grocery store in a couple of small towns in southern Minnesota. My mom later learned that her biological mother, of German extraction, had taught in the English department of the University of Minnesota. She was told that her biological father, a Norwegian-American, had been killed in France in World War I.

Q: How did your mother and father meet?

NEITZKE: They met early in the war, in the early 1940s. My dad was a Navy air corpsman, a radio man, ultimately spending a couple years flying in Naval surveillance planes near Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands. He was in and out of Seattle during that service, where my mom was working for Shell Oil. They met on a blind date arranged by a mutual friend from Minnesota. They were married in 1944.

Q: Well then, did you grow up in Minnesota?

NEITZKE: Yes.

Q: Talk a bit about being a kid. I mean, I am talking about a small kid there, growing up in, where was it, Detroit Lakes? What kind of place was it?

NEITZKE: It was small town middle America, but to me, of course, it was the whole world. I was the third of six children - four boys and two girls. I had two older brothers. I was a fairly serious kid, always serious about school, but I also liked sports, especially hockey. This was northern Minnesota, so we were all skaters from early on. I loved being outdoors. I even did some trapping as a kid, muskrats and gophers mainly, and some fishing. My dad and brothers were avid hunters, so I hunted a bit too, mostly ducks. And there was scouting, of course. Life when I was very young was carefree. Families were much larger then. There were always lots of kids around to play with, lots of adventures to be had, and parents didn't hover over you and worry as they do now. The lakes, and there were hundreds around where I grew up, were a focal point for activities of all kinds - summer and winter - and drew large numbers of tourists from Canada and neighboring states. The winters were harsh; we really did walk to school at times through six foot snow drifts. And we played hockey outdoors at twenty below zero. But the summers could be hot and humid, Washington-like. And there was no air conditioning. And there were swarms of killer mosquitoes the size of chicken hawks. At least that's how I remember it.

But in general, life was good. Later, when I'd gotten out into the world a bit, I recall looking back on those early days as happy, all in all, but pretty limited in terms of what there was to experience. I came to appreciate, though, that my mom's and dad's lives back then embodied the post-war American dream - come back from the war, marry, have kids, work hard, save, send your kids to college, contribute to your community.

Q: I have to say, since you are from Minnesota, your description reminds me just a little of Lake Wobegon. Do you ever listen to Prairie Home Companion?

NEITZKE: Of course, and I once heard Garrison Keillor describe where his mythical Lake Wobegon was actually located, or would have been located, and he mentioned a place just 60 miles from where I grew up. There are similarities, but Keillor's Wobegon is much smaller and more insular than Detroit Lakes. Life in Lake Wobegon seems simple, in a way that life in very small town America often seems in retrospect, sort of idealized. But there are aspects of Keillor's Wobegon that hit home, especially the strong sense of place that nearly all of his characters feel, knowing that that's where they belong and embracing it. There are other sides to small town life in the Midwest, of course, as Sinclair Lewis, another Minnesotan, and others have described a lot less sympathetically.

Q: Tell me more about your early life. What did your father do for a living?

NEITZKE: My dad owned a concrete products factory, where my brothers and I worked from an early age. In fact, other than school and sports, what I recall most vividly is work in my dad's factory, all summer, many Saturdays, and sometimes after school. It was hard, a very formative experience. My dad was a proud, independent businessman, strongly opposed to unions, but he treated his workers well and gave a lot back to his community. He headed nearly every local service organizations at one time or another, served on the school board, even ran for the state legislature and came within a hair of unseating a long-term incumbent. My mom, too, when she wasn't tending to us six kids, was active in community service organizations.

Q: Well a couple of things. In the first place, how Catholic was your family?

NEITZKE: Not zealous, but we had a fairly pronounced Catholic identity. Some of that was a reaction to native anti-Catholicism and some of it came from old Catholic vs. Lutheran tensions in my dad's parents' families. Again, being Catholic didn't make you popular with everyone when my dad was growing up; he told of getting into fights because of his religion, and he developed a strong sense of being Catholic. Some of that's also attributable to his very strong mother, whose family, as I mentioned, had come from southwestern Germany and was staunchly Catholic.

Q: Was the priest an authority figure much?

NEITZKE: Respected, and yes, an authority figure in church matters, but not beyond that. I recall a mini-scandal once when the pastor tried to tell the parishioners how to vote in a coming election. That didn't sit well. I was influenced by him, though, or more by his assistant actually. After eight years in parochial school, taught by Benedictine nuns, I went off to St. John's University Prep School in Collegeville, Minnesota, in part to consider whether to become a priest. But one year of that was enough. I decided I'd need a lot more experience of life before considering that kind of commitment.

Q: You say your father ran a concrete products factory. What does that mean?

NEITZKE: We made and sold concrete building blocks of all shapes and descriptions. My dad started it after the war and built it into a prosperous business, dominating the regional market. He was the best salesman, in fact one of the best one-on-one negotiators, I've ever met. Working in his block plant taught my brothers and me some important values. On the other hand, much of it was hard, grunt labor, often dirty and sometimes unhealthy. I remember especially, and hated at the time, having to descend into clouds of cement dust to scrape out train cars. Other days were spent driving delivery trucks or lifting tons of blocks 40 pounds at a time while standing next to loud, screeching machinery. There would be OSHA problems with some of that today.

Q: OSHA?

NEITZKE: The Occupational Safety and Health folks.

Q: I see. You mentioned values you learned working in your father's factory. Such as...

NEITZKE: The value of a dollar measured in hard physical labor, but also the dignity of physical work, and just the ability to do hard physical labor all day, day after day. Also pride in earning one's way, learning what it takes to run a business successfully, how to treat workers and customers to earn their loyalty, in general, basic values that over time become part of your outlook on life. I remember being struck, after entering the Foreign Service, by the contrast between the kind of work I'd witnessed, and done, and the wages it paid, and the kind of work done in government at incomparably better salaries, generating ideas and producing papers - work that often led nowhere, had no bottom line.

Q: You mentioned your father was strongly anti-union. Were your parents Republican?

NEITZKE: My dad was an independent, always voting for the candidate rather than the party. But it was the Democrats who persuaded him to run for the state legislature. My mom was strongly Democrat, but she didn't wear this affiliation openly. As they explained it, they felt that in their lifetimes the Democrats had far more often been the party looking out for the little guy, for people without wealth or connections.

Q: At home, was there much interest in the news, from papers, radio, or TV?

NEITZKE: There were always magazines, books, and newspapers in our home, and we had TV early on. Political events and figures were talked about, and sometimes argued about, but there was a strong distinction between what adults discussed among themselves and what they discussed with children, even older children. I remember listening to heated political arguments among my grandfather, my dad, and his brothers at my grandparents' house, real free-for-alls from which everyone walked out shouting, only to gather again for another round the following week. I jumped into a few of these when I reached high school age. I had the impression even then that especially the war, World War II, getting out of that town and seeing and experiencing something of the world, had helped shape how my dad and his brothers thought about the larger issues of the day. But at our house, meal times, and the family always ate together, were usually spent discussing everyday matters, who was doing what, or who was going where, rather than, say, national or international events. There were exceptions, though. I remember my oldest brother and his friends campaigning around town for Eisenhower in '56. And I recall to this day the great tenseness in my family during the height of the Cuban missile crisis. As I grew older and Vietnam loomed larger, that began to creep into our family discussions as well, often by my taking on my father over war-related issues.

Q: Going back to your elementary and high school time, obviously you were doing this hard labor most of the time, but were you much of a reader?

NEITZKE: I wasn't the kind of kid who would stay in his room all day reading. There was always too much else to do. But I liked books a lot and, as time went on, I did better and better in school and my reading interests broadened out.

Q: When you reached high school, were there some subjects you really liked and those you did not?

NEITZKE: I didn't strongly dislike anything, but math, science, and history were probably my favorites, along with philosophy, although I'm not sure whether that was taught as a separate subject.

Q: Well, what was high school like?

NEITZKE: As I mentioned, the first year I went away to a private Catholic prep school. That was the year, 1963-64, when Kennedy was shot and the Beatles came to America. My final three years were back at the local public high school. There was a strong public commitment in Minnesota, and in my home town, to education. Some of my teachers were outstanding. Others were not. The high school was tenth through twelfth grades, about 250 students per grade. I played basketball as a sophomore, then switched to hockey. I was a Student Council representative, president of the National Honor Society, had excellent grades. I went through a Holden Caulfield phase as a junior and senior. My thinking on many things took a skeptical, challenging turn. And again, this was the Vietnam era, so that tended to color a lot of things.

Q: Holden Caulfield, now that was Catcher in the Rye, was it not, I mean, the young man obsessed with, what, the phoniness, the people...

NEITZKE: Yes, that's it.

Q: Well, did that manifest itself in any particular way?

NEITZKE: An epiphany of sorts, a sense of alienation, and long discussions with friends and a teacher or two who seemed to get it, to understand and partly share that perspective. What we debated, as I recall, nearly ad nauseam, is whether society could ever be changed fundamentally, whether one person could hope to change anything. I always argued in the affirmative. Not a revolutionary notion for a teenager. But it was genuine. I recall one sympathetic teacher in particular, not wanting quite to burst my bubble, strongly advising me not to waste my life challenging the unchangeable.

Q: Well, you graduated in-?

NEITZKE: '67.

Q: 1967. How stood you with the draft?

NEITZKE: I was given the standard 2S student deferment to go to college. Not a fair or just system, of course, but that's the way it was.

Q: Where did you go to college?

NEITZKE: I ended up going to St. Thomas College in St. Paul my freshman year. That followed a hurried, basically unguided search for some place more exotic and distant from home. I wanted to break out, but I really didn't know what was out there, what was available. No one took me in tow, for example, and said you should go to so and so. No long distance, multi-college tours of the sort that kids go on today. My two older brothers were attending the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities. My parents strongly supported our going to college but, with six kids, it was unlikely they'd be able to pay for me to go somewhere private. In fact, we were expected to pay nearly all of our own college expenses. And you could, just about, from your summer earnings. Ultimately, I spent everything I'd saved up until then on freshman year at St. Thomas, a small, private, all-male college. It's where Gene McCarthy had taught.

Q: This is Eugene McCarthy?

NEITZKE: Senator Eugene McCarthy, yes, and this was 1967-68, when he challenged Johnson over Vietnam. I heard him speak there once and was impressed, not least by his delivering the punch line to a joke in Latin. But it turned out it wasn't for me. The professors were good and I did well, but most of the students had come from all-male Catholic prep schools in the Twin Cities or Chicago. It wasn't a good fit. I found it claustrophobic. It was expensive. And there were no girls. So, after a year, I moved up river and made my peace with going to the University of Minnesota. And I liked it. I changed my major to international relations and spent my final three years there.

Q: What was the campus of the University of Minnesota like when you got there?

NEITZKE: It was one of the largest schools in the country, some 45,000 students. And it was also huge in terms of the area it covered. I would walk, speed walk really, across the Mississippi River a couple times a day to and from classes. Given its size, it could be very impersonal. Often you wouldn't see any student twice in the same day, so you tended to form a small group of close friends. But what I liked about a school that size was that there was always a lot going on, speakers and activities of all sorts. And if you were determined and disciplined about it, as I tried to be, you could spend many nights at special speeches, rallies, film showings, presentations, or seminars on race relations, Vietnam, the environment, and other hot issues. I remember, for example, going to hear Julian Bond speak, David Halberstam, who had just written The Best and the Brightest, about Vietnam, Paul Ehrlich, who'd written The Population Bomb, and many others.

Q: Did any of the professors or instructors particularly impress you? Do any other books stick in your mind?

NEITZKE: For Econ 101 I had, along with hundreds of others in a massive auditorium, Walter Heller, who had chaired Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisors. I had a professor of American intellectual history named David Noble, who had written Historians Against History, The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden, and others. He was a stubborn iconoclast, contesting the notion of American exceptionalism. His lectures were standing room only and sometimes raucous. Of course this was the time when other historians, the revisionists, were challenging America's self-image from other directions. And it was a time of mass student protests over Vietnam.

As for books from those years, the three that come most readily to mind are Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, The Making of a Counter Culture, by Theodore Roszak, and the first volume of George Kennan's Memoirs.

Q: I want to back up for a minute. What about racial consciousness? What about the Indian population of Minnesota? How aware were you of the Indians growing up? There were Indian reservations all over that part of the country.

NEITZKE: It's strange. If you had asked me at the age of 18 about racial attitudes based on personal experience, I'd largely have drawn a blank. I wouldn't have first thought of the Indians. I'd have assumed you were talking about blacks. And the only blacks I had met up to that point were, I'm not kidding, Jesse Owens, who had come through town and played golf with my dad and some other men, and Elgin Baylor and others on the Minneapolis Lakers basketball team that played an exhibition game in my town not long before the franchise moved to Los Angeles. Somewhat later, the Job Corps, a Johnson Great Society program, began to bring groups of black, inner-city youth from Chicago and elsewhere to training camps in the northern woods twenty or thirty miles from my home, but they rarely appeared in town.

As for Indians, however, yes, there were Indian reservations around where I lived. I knew that the Indians on the reservations were poor, but they were largely out of sight, and you didn't often see a lot of people around who were recognizably Indian. This was before the tribal rights and native American pride movements, before the large monetary settlements with some of the tribes, before the building of casinos on reservations and so forth. You would occasionally hear something in elementary school about missions or church schools on the reservations, but that was about all. Ironically, at my dad's factory, I worked daily with an Indian, a Korean War vet, I believe, who was the crew foreman. Doug was a great guy, and a friend, although much older than me. But, again, I never thought even of Doug as an Indian in the first instance.

Q: Well, back on the campus, in the first place, before we move on to Vietnam, what about the civil rights movement and all of that? Did that affect you?

NEITZKE: Not personally. Even in the much larger context of Minneapolis-St. Paul, where there was a modest black population, I would have to say no, it didn't. First, even a huge university is in many ways a cloistered place, and there weren't many black students then. Most of the black students I would see were athletes and, as such, had a separate and privileged life on campus. But nearly all of the protest at the University while I was there, this was mid-1968 to 1971, were directed at the war. The Twin Cites hadn't exploded to anywhere near the extent that other cities had in the wake of King's assassination, but yes, we were all aware of it. Hubert Humphrey was still a major political figure, Vice President through '68, a man who'd built his career partly on outspokenness on civil rights. If I can digress just a minute, on election day 1968, when Humphrey lost by a hair to Nixon, even though I'd been an avid supporter of Bobby Kennedy before his assassination, I went out to the airport just to see Humphrey when he came home to await the results and ended up being the first person to shake his hand when he came off the plane. I met him again later, when he taught at the University. A good man, I still think, despite all that happened in '68. But, getting back to your question, civil rights wasn't a major preoccupation for me or most others at the University in those years. It wasn't until I came to Washington and entered the Foreign Service that civil rights issues - by then beginning to take the form of identity politics - began to appear more significant.

Q: Well let's talk about your awareness of Vietnam and what you did on the campus, what was going on on the campus.

NEITZKE: It was a time of mass protests against the war and against arms producers, a surprising number of which had large facilities in the Twin Cities area. The University of Minnesota was never as radical as, say, Madison, the University of Wisconsin, but in '69, '70, it was fairly energized. There were marches drawing tens of thousands, and I marched a couple times. But I was underwhelmed. They seemed regimented, with a herd mentality taking hold. Some seemed to be just along for the ride, as though the main point were simply to protest, or to have fun, or skip class. I recall one mass rally at the end of a march at which someone identified as a Catholic priest supposedly consecrated loaves of bread and started heaving them out into the crowd. And I thought, well, what the hell is this? How serious is any of this? So I began to read all I could on Vietnam, its history, the ceasefire accords, how the conflict had reignited and so forth.

Q: Well did you get any feel that the Vietnam protest was being used as a handy instrument, and I do not mean this pejoratively, but by young people who were learning to be political leaders in raising the crowd. In a way, they were manipulating the system.

NEITZKE: I'm sure that for the march organizers this was pretty heady stuff. Whether it was the first step on anyone's political career, I don't know. As for manipulation, that came from both sides; I'd hesitate to say it was all coming from protest leaders and that the universities or student protesters were mere pawns. I did sense, however, that many of those marching probably couldn't have passed even a basic test on the facts of the conflict. It was almost more a social movement, a coming of age for a lot of people.

Q: In the old days you used to go to revival meetings, but now you had the protests.

NEITZKE: What pushed many of the young men onto the streets was not the war per se, which frankly didn't affect most of them personally, even if they happened to know a few who'd gone off to fight it. It was a sense of solidarity with their peers, but it was mainly, I think, the fear that the Government, through the draft, was going to force them to do something against their will, deprive them of their liberty, perhaps make them risk death, let alone for a cause they didn't understand or didn't believe in. Opposition to the war may have been genuine, but the draft is what made it personal. And when the draft ended you noticed a precipitous drop off in mass protests. Of course, American involvement in the war was beginning to wind down by then as well.

Q: Oh yes. I mean this was so obvious. While you were marching, I was Consul General in Saigon for part of '69 to '70. We had protests by American students who were able to get to the Embassy, light some candles and things like that. But as soon as the draft ended except for, I think, Joan Baez, who was really doing something about the refugees, all these people who were so terribly concerned about it were not around anymore.

NEITZKE: Joan Baez. I have many of her records. I remember trekking through a snowstorm one evening down to an auditorium in St. Paul to see her perform. The first thing she did on taking the stage was to invite all the young men to come forward and burn their draft cards. I declined. Our paths crossed many years later, when I intervened with President Tudjman's office in wartime Croatia in 1993 to help arrange for an impromptu Joan Baez concert in Zagreb's main square, which was actually quite moving. But the anti-Vietnam War protests weren't inconsequential, and they weren't all the result of manipulation. But as all this was happening, I was taking foreign policy courses and beginning to think about trying to do something, at least in a small way, to change things, about joining the very government that the protesters were screaming at.

Q: Well tell me about the courses. In the first place, as you say, you had not been out in the real world much. Were you looking at any particular area of the world?

NEITZKE: Europe perhaps, but not to the exclusion of other areas. I'd been drawn to International Relations, a relatively new college major then, in part because it allowed me not to have to focus much on any one area or subject. It was broadly multi-disciplinary. It's only a slight stretch to say that I was interested in everything in those years. But in my major, the classes I enjoyed most, apart from Professor Noble's performances, were in diplomatic history and international law. In the courses I took focused more narrowly on foreign policy, I tended to challenge what some of the professors were pitching. For example, modeling was in vogue at that time.

Q: Can you explain what a model was?

NEITZKE: Interpreting or predicting states' behavior based on what seemed to me were often artificial or arbitrary constructs. For example, if state X had the following 10 attributes, it would likely act in this way under these particular circumstances. Much more nuanced than that, but that's the gist of it. They just struck me as - obviously I didn't have any personal foreign policy experience on which to base this reaction but - not reflective of reality, as sort of esoteric academic inventions, largely devoid of the human factor, for just as often misjudging as correctly predicting how nations would behave.

Q: Well actually you were at the beginning of when political science went wrong. It started trying to turn into a science and a predictor and got involved in quantification.

NEITZKE: There was also a movement, as I recall, among international organization enthusiasts and theorists who believed that these organizations were transforming the nation-state system into, if not a stateless system, one in which states would be increasingly subordinate to international organizations and perhaps ultimately to a world government. This too struck me as more academic idealization than a reflection of reality.

Q: What about the Cold War and the Soviet Union? Minnesota's pretty far from everything but I mean-

NEITZKE: Actually, Minnesota wasn't that far from everything. The ICBM silos were just across the border in North Dakota, and I was aware of that growing up. Like other kids back then, when I was very young we'd have the nuclear fallout drills at school. We'd all practice getting under our desks. But beyond that silliness, I was aware early on that we were living close to targets that would be hit in a full-scale U.S.-Soviet nuclear exchange. I recall the Sputnik episode, the fascination with it and the threat that it seemed to pose. And, as I mentioned, October 1962, the height of the Cuban missile crisis, was a tense time for us. But the Cold War as such was not really something that I thought much about until I was well into college.

Q: What attracted you to the Foreign Service?

NEITZKE: My International Relations major oriented me in that direction, but the two most important factors were the first volume of Kennan's memoirs and a talk given by a FSO on a recruitment trip to the University, speaking about Foreign Service careers. Nonetheless, if one day I hadn't noticed a tiny ad in the Minnesota Daily, the college newspaper, for the upcoming FSO written exam, in 1970, I'd have missed the deadline and my life would have taken a different turn. I say that because just after accepting an offer to join the Foreign Service, I received a call offering me, out of the blue, a teaching assistantship at the University of Virginia, which I'd probably have taken if the Foreign Service hadn't called first. Another part of the allure of the Foreign Service was that, if you'd grown up in the cold north country - if you've listened to some of Dylan's early songs, you know how dark and grim one side of life up there can be, especially in the long winters - you might want to escape, to break out and see the world.

Q: Did you know anyone who had been in the Service?

NEITZKE: No. I'm not sure I even knew anyone who worked for the Federal Government. I recall once telling some people that I'd be joining the Foreign Service and being asked exactly what part of the Forest Service I'd be working in. When I'd sometimes mention the State Department, I'd be asked, well, the State Department of what? A Minnesota state agency, I guess they presumed. When I'd finally say the diplomatic service, most had at least a vague idea what that was. These people were all bright, civic-minded, and generally well informed. It's just that where I came from, at least in the early 1970s, this profession wasn't on anyone's radar screen. It was self-generated. Kennan's book just hit me. And then, you know, you're a senior in college, your future's uncertain, and you decide to take a test. And I passed.

Q: Well then, you took the oral exam when?

NEITZKE: The spring of '71, in Chicago.

Q: Did you have long hair at the time?

NEITZKE: I'd had fairly long hair at the University. It was a bone of contention between my dad and me, which of course was satisfying. It was sort of a self-defining, self-segregating thing, except that it really wasn't because so many others had long hair then. I imagine I got it trimmed for my trip to Chicago.

Q: Well, do you remember the questions and how the examiners treated you?

NEITZKE: I'd picked up some information about the exam was administered. I'd been led to believe that tricks were played on applicants, that they might be invited to open a window that was nailed shut, or given a glass of water that was leaking.

Q: The dribble glass.

NEITZKE: Pardon?

Q: The dribble glass.

NEITZKE: The dribble glass. That's great.

Q: Offered a cigarette with no ashtray.

NEITZKE: I didn't hear about that one. Anyway, I didn't smoke.

Q: I used to give the oral exam and would sometimes give a little spiel saying look, we are not going to play these games.

NEITZKE: I remember my trip to Chicago. It was the farthest east I'd traveled. I went alone. I got in late, took a taxi to a downtown motel and asked for a wake-up call. It never came. When I finally awoke, I was running very late. I shaved in a hurry, cut myself badly, put on the wrong pair of trousers, and, rushing in a cab, managed about as frenzied an arrival as possible. But once there, I quickly got on with it. I think we were first asked to write essays on a couple international law questions. One was to lay out a legal framework for the recognition of foreign states.

Next I sat alone before three examiners, all males. They weren't hostile, but they weren't all that welcoming either. I was 22, with a limited background. Their attitude was sort of, well, why should we take you, what makes you think you're good enough? Not in those exact words, but that was the sense of it. But I wasn't put off. I was psyched and spoke directly to them and felt good about how I was doing. They were testing not just the breadth of my knowledge but how I comported myself under pressure. And it was going pretty well until I got a question on events in Nigeria. I think it was about Biafra.

Q: Biafra probably.

NEITZKE: I knew a little, but only a little, and they kept probing. So I told them what I knew about it, and just a little more than I knew, I guess, because one examiner interrupted me to say, Mr. Neitzke, if you don't know, don't guess. So that was the lesson. Among the other questions, I recall one about Reinhold Niebuhr, who I think had died the previous week. They wanted to know how I thought he had influenced America. They asked me to compare the works of some American and Russian composers. They asked some international law questions, particularly about the Vietnam War. And they asked me how I'd handle various situations I might find myself in abroad.

But there's one more question I should mention. I suspect that in the hundreds of FSO interviews you've done you've never come across one quite like this. It came near the end of the exam, which I thought had gone extremely well to that point. The atmosphere in the room was much warmer than at the outset. And the question was simple enough: tell us, Mr. Neitzke, who was your favorite college professor, who meant the most to you? It struck me as a throwaway. Why would they care? I thought about saying David Noble, the history professor, and I thought about an international law professor I'd gotten to know. But the honest answer was neither; it was a priest from whom I'd taken a poetry class as a freshman at St. Thomas. This guy had really gotten to me. And I explained why I so appreciated him. Finally, the examiner who had put the question to me turned and asked, well, what was his name? Again, why would he care? But I told him. And the examiner just looked at me for a long moment, then appeared to get somewhat emotional, and said, he's my brother. He was his brother, for god's sake. What are the chances of that? And the other two examiners' jaws dropped, and the lead examiner started sputtering something about a coincidence of the first water. I'd never heard that expression before, but it seemed apt.

Q: Oh my God.

NEITZKE: It was strange.

Q: So you passed the orals and what came next?

NEITZKE: Medical and security clearances. If I passed those, I'd be placed on the rank order register, a competitive rank order list from which candidates might or might not be offered Foreign Service positions. I remember asking the University police to fingerprint me, kind of a curious feeling. And I remember being interviewed for my background investigation, by whom I don't recall, but it was in a small room at the University library. One of the key areas of interest was whether I'd smoked marijuana or used other drugs. The truth was that I hadn't. Marijuana was all over the place in those years, and I'd been offered it at various times but declined. It was no big deal, I just didn't want it. And the other question I recall was the extent of my protest against the war. I told them essentially what I've told you. The background checks in my case apparently went quickly, because in the early fall of '71 I got a call from the State Department offering me a spot in the November FSO class. I wasn't thinking about salary, but they said I'd be starting out at $8,300 and asked how that compared with what I was then making. I told them it was $8,300 more than I was making at the time and sounded fine. Then, having said yes to the Foreign Service, I got that offer from UVA and had to say no. I'd also been thinking about law school, but decided to put that on hold - permanently as it turned out. So in early November I drove out to Washington for the A-100 course.

Q: Alright. Well then you entered the Foreign Service 1971. What was your draft status?

NEITZKE: That had been clarified for all of us during my junior or senior year in college, when the old Selective Service System was replaced with a national lottery. The number drawn for my birth date was 200. They only reached 185 in the year that I was exposed to the draft, so I was free. It wasn't really any fairer than the old system.

Q: Alright, you came to Washington in November 1971. What was your initial impression of the place?

NEITZKE: It was a rush. I took every opportunity I had outside of FSO training to wander around and see as much as I could, the monuments, the museums, Arlington Cemetery, Mount Vernon, Embassy Row, Capitol Hill, and so on. Some days I'd look for an interesting hearing to attend on the Hill. I remember that in February 1972, while I was still in training, I got a pass to the White House to observe Nixon's departure on his ground-breaking trip to China. I hadn't yet heard of Potomac Fever, but I was pretty taken in by the wonder of it all, and also by an awareness that I wasn't there as a tourist, that I had an opportunity to become at least a small part of it. I know, hardly unique; it's what a lot of young people feel on coming to Washington. But it was great.

Q: So you entered the A-100 course. This was class 100 you said?

NEITZKE: Yes, the 100th Class. But it may have been the second count to 100.

Q: Well it was probably, I entered in 1955 in class one, after they changed the counting, and I think your 100th class was still the same count, It gives you an idea of our relative age in the Foreign Service. Can you describe your class and how you felt about it?

NEITZKE: There were a couple others as young as I was. The average age was over 27, about 5 years older than me. Many had a fair amount of real world experience, had traveled extensively, even lived abroad, perhaps served in the Peace Corps or the Armed Forces. Some had Masters degrees, a couple had PhDs. I recall too that mid-level female and minority entrants comprised a significant part of the class, 8 or 9 out of the 28 or so. That left an impression, watching how this group was dealt with, often singled out or called out, treated separately and differently from the rest of us. We were told that this was part of a broader transition in the Foreign Service; management was trying to increase the number of female and minority FSOs to overcome past injustices. That seemed laudable enough, but the awkwardness with which it was handled was striking. Also, given my own background, I was taken aback by the group identity aspect of this. I'd never thought of myself, first and foremost, as a privileged white male, which was, although understated, essentially the line being pushed. I just didn't see a lot of privilege in my or my family's background, certainly not compared to some of my more pedigreed classmates. But, like all A-100 classes, we did eventually coalesce as a group.

I also recall being pushed early in A-100 to join the AFSA. There was talk of needing to defend ourselves against management, in part to ensure that we wouldn't be selected out at mid-career. There'd been a recent tragedy involving an officer selected out in his 40s, I believe. But this too struck me as odd. We weren't factory workers. We were about to begin helping with the serious task of executing our nation's foreign policy. Didn't we want a strongly merit-based, competitive, up-or-out system? I guess I was a bit naï¿½ve.

Q: Let's turn to political attitudes. What were you getting about our involvement in Vietnam? We were withdrawing and getting close to the peace accords.

NEITZKE: I don't recall that Vietnam was an overriding focus. And that itself was quite a change, I came to learn, because up until a year or two before that virtually everybody entering the Service, or so we were led to believe, had gone into CORDS training for Vietnam, in a training center in Roslyn Towers.

Q: In the garage.

NEITZKE: I was living on an upper floor of that building. I think that training had ended at least a year earlier, so my introduction to the Service was different, to say the least. The list of posts from which we were to state four or five preferences included Paris, Hamburg, Oslo, and a few other nice places, along with a variety of hardship posts. While we thought it our good fortune not to be going to Vietnam, we didn't appreciate just what CORDS and other hardship jobs could mean in terms of career development.

Q: Yes, many of them got quite a bit of responsibility.

NEITZKE: I didn't appreciate that what you might want to do early on is go for the utmost hardship. But this decision, our first posting, was largely out of our hands in any event; we were given little or no career development guidance. On the other hand, I did put in for Port au Prince, along with other hardship posts and some non-hardship posts.

Q: I think there is too much of this. Having done almost 1,000 of these interviews and having experienced it myself, often the job sounds awful, being administrative officer in a small post in Indonesia or something rather than being a political officer in Paris, but the seemingly less attractive jobs offer much better experience than one would realize. As you were going through A-100, what was it, about three months or something like that?

NEITZKE: It started in November. After we got our assignments, in around late December, we were farmed out to offices in the Department, in my case Scandinavian Affairs. Then we returned to A-100 briefly before our other training assignments began. I needed the consular course and Norwegian language training.

Q: Well were you picking up in the corridors or anywhere any information to help you decide, you know, what you wanted to do, where you wanted to serve and all?

NEITZKE: A little, but, as I said, in the short term this was out of our hands. There was no negotiation. I should add that after finishing up at the University of Minnesota and before heading out for the A-100 course, I decided it would be good to improve my spoken French. I'd taken three years in college but didn't speak it very well. I thought this would put me in a better position for a French-speaking post. So I took private lessons in Minneapolis and tested at FSI at the 2-plus level. I had no idea at the time that the chances of getting assigned to a particular country early in one's career were almost inversely proportional to one's ability to speak that country's language. So I listed Port au Prince along with Paris and other French language posts. But on that tense day in A-100 when they announced assignments, they read my name and said Oslo. So that was it.

Q: So you went to Oslo when?

NEITZKE: I arrived in July or August of '72, following Norwegian language training.

Q: How did you find the Norwegians?

NEITZKE: I'd grown up among Scandinavian-Americans, honest, direct people, generally unpretentious and reserved. Although it's difficult to generalize, that's pretty much how I found the people of Norway, at least older Norwegians. Friendly enough, but quite formal. Younger Norwegians seemed like young people everywhere. And the entire nation seemed remarkably fit. Regarding Norwegian reserve, before we move on, let me tell you about one of my neighbors in Norway. The first place I lived there was way too nice for a first-tour officer, pretty far removed from CORDS. It was a vine covered cottage about 10 miles outside Oslo on a small lake with mountains in the distance and swans that swam by on cue, more or less. It was at the end of a dead-end lane with only one neighboring house. And as I neared the end of my year in that cottage, I had not, for some reason, met my neighbors, or even seen much of them. They were never out and about. Then one day, as I was preparing to leave actually, the father of the neighboring family came out and walked over to me and I thought, well, this is nice; he's finally going to say hello, sorry we didn't get to meet one another earlier, or some such. So I introduced myself and tried to make light conversation. He didn't respond. Instead, he pointed to my flag pole - nearly every house flew the Norwegian flag all year round but I'd never paid any attention to the flag atop the pole next to my house - and he said, in Norwegian, unsmiling, your flag, it's not all the way up, and turned and walked back to his house. That's it. An extreme example, perhaps, maybe a fluke, but it contains at least a kernel of insight into the Norwegian soul, and into what some average Norwegians thought about American officials during the Vietnam era. But generally, Norwegians were warmer than that, and welcoming.

1972 wasn't the best time to be an official American in Norway. While working in the Consular Section, I went out on a political reporting assignment, to cover a mass rally in central Oslo called to denounce our involvement in Vietnam, an event that united all Norwegian political parties, from extreme left to extreme right, people who strongly disagreed with one another on most issues but were united in hating our Vietnam policy. There was a sanctimoniousness, a moral self-righteousness, in many Norwegians toward, if not all Americans, at least our government and those of us representing it.

Q: Who was your ambassador while you were there?

NEITZKE: I had two. The first was Phil Crowe. He'd previously been ambassador in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. He was a political appointee, connected to John Olin of Olin Chemical as I recall, a staunch Republican, a big game hunter-adventurer type, larger than life, unabashedly old school, very formal. He clearly enjoyed the title, comforts, and prestige of the job, including the grand mansion of a Residence in Oslo. His DCM was John Ausland, a man I came to respect a great deal. Ausland's background was in arms control. In my second year, Tom Byrne replaced Crowe. His background was in labor affairs, I think.

Q: Ausland later went to Finland and he has written quite a bit about-

NEITZKE: I thought he went off to do arms control talks. In retirement he lived in Oslo and wrote opinion pieces for the International Herald Tribune on East-West issues.

Q: Did the ambassador intrude on your life at all or was he just beyond the beyond?

NEITZKE: After I'd spent a few months in the consular section, Ausland yanked me out and made me Crowe's staff aide. So I moved to the front office. A great opportunity to see how an embassy runs, to get to know more of the key officers, attend staff meetings, read all the cable traffic, learn about the other agencies and so on. It gave me a perspective that it might otherwise have taken several tours to get, if then. And I did spend a fair amount of time around Crowe. He was an interesting guy, an overblown embodiment of wealth and privilege. He affected the bearing of junior royalty almost. He was not unintelligent, and when a serious issue came up he would deal with it, and he could be immensely charming, but you sensed that the title, the deference, and creature comforts were paramount. And that Ausland ran the show on a day in day out basis.

Q: I have talked to a number of people who served in Oslo and one of the problems that you have with our Scandinavian embassies, which go to political appointees, is that a disturbing percentage of the ambassadors are, ah, attracted to the young ladies.

NEITZKE: I'm sorry, did you say Peyton Place? Oslo was my only Scandinavian post and a lot of people did, as you say, notice the young ladies. I'm not sure I'd focus only on the ambassadors.

Q: Well let us go back to the consular side. We are still involved in Vietnam. Did you have deserters and all of that?

NEITZKE: Not that I recall. In Scandinavia, Sweden was the destination of choice for U.S. Army deserters. Despite its opposition to our involvement in Vietnam, Norway wouldn't have been all that hospitable to deserters, certainly not Norwegian officialdom. Just outside Oslo, after all, were the NATO headquarters of Allied Forces Northern Europe. And bordering the Soviet Union in the far north, and with Soviet submarines a constant danger off the coast and near the fjords, the Norwegian Government and we had plenty of cause for cooperation. Apart from Vietnam, the relationship was essentially sound, as far as I could tell. I recall, as an aside, that while I was there the Norwegians hosted a NATO Nuclear Planning Group meeting. Defense Secretary Schlesinger came with a large party, and I was given a coordinating role on the security side. My first ride in a C-130. But getting back to your question, no, I don't think Norway was much of a haven for U.S. deserters.

Q: What about the consular work? What sort of things were you involved in?

NEITZKE: What I most vividly recall is the Welfare and Whereabouts work. Shortly after I arrived, there was a nasty incident involving a U.S. Navy ship visit to Oslo, and allegations American sailors had brutally raped a young Norwegian mother. All the defendants were black and one was underage, and they were all jailed pending trial. They needed a legal guardian for the underage defendant, and I was it. At the beginning of the trial, I actually sat next to him in the defendants' box. The trial ended just before Christmas 1972, either with acquittal or dismissal of all charges due to technical flaws in the police work. Enough evidence had been presented, however, physical evidence and testimony by the victim, to make pretty clear that at least some of these guys did it. The kid for whom I was guardian was one very scared young man. The Embassy MAAG, Military Assistance Advisory Group, had hired one of Norway's top defense attorneys, and he got them off, and they were hustled out of the country. I was struck by the extent to which the trial had been less about establishing truth than about winning at all costs. The police were no match for our high-paid attorney, and the victim was made to suffer a new round of indignities. The whole thing left you feeling sick to your stomach.

I remember another situation, a mental case, an American stowaway aboard a plane from Spain that landed in Norway. It was my job to help nurse him through his recovery. And he did recover after months in a mental institution. He told me a harrowing story of his wife's infidelity that had led to his temporary insanity. That was a gratifying case. I remember having to deal with kids who'd gone over there to travel around and had run out of funds or gotten in trouble. I remember visiting Americans in prison. One in particular, serving a lengthy sentence, later sent a long letter to my supervisor, saying he'd been expecting just another stuffed shirt from the Embassy, his words, but that he'd been pleasantly surprised. I didn't think I'd done anything that unusual.

Q: What about visa work?

NEITZKE: I did that as well. After about a year as staff aide, and sometime after Crowe and Ausland had departed, I returned to the Consular Section. The visa work was of an interesting sort. I'm embarrassed to say this to someone who's done consular work in terribly difficult places, and, for the record, I did go on to Belgrade and do a year of consular work that was much more challenging. But our main task in Oslo, in non-immigrant visa work, was to try to keep beautiful, young, blue-eyed blondes out of the U.S. who wanted to go over to take care of someone's kids for a year without a work permit. Those cases often required exhaustive interviews.

Q: I am sure. They sit there and the tears sort of well up in their eyes.

NEITZKE: That probably helped resolve a case or two. So there was that. And with the welfare and whereabouts cases, work in general was interesting enough. This was all new for me. I was living overseas for the first time, and I didn't know in a concrete sense what else there was. I was not in Southeast Asia. I was not in the Soviet bloc. I was not on the visa lines in Mexico. In my performance evaluations, however, and in counseling sessions, my supervisors kept saying that this was all well and good but wasn't really challenging Neitzke. He needed to go some place more stimulating.

Q: While you were the ambassador's aide, did you get any feel for the Norwegian political situation and the political personalities there?

NEITZKE: Crowe had already written a couple books, one on wildlife, I believe. He was planning to write a book about the people he'd met and the issues he'd dealt with in Norway. He asked me to write biographies of the prime ministers, foreign ministers, defense ministers, party leaders, and others he'd encountered. So I plowed through the bio and other files, books, and papers, researching these people and, in many instances, trying my damnedest to make them sound interesting, which was not often easy. Norway had plenty of strong, sensible leaders, but didn't typically give rise to wildly interesting political personalities. What I didn't appreciate at the time, however, is the extent to which this small nation on the margins of Europe produces superb negotiators, accepted as honest brokers in far-flung conflicts, the Middle East and the Balkans, for example.

Norway was fairly placid politically while I was there, with one big exception, apart from their agitation over Vietnam, and that was the issue of whether to join the European Community. Norwegian voters rejected membership, and that came as a surprise to many. There were various reasons, but part of it, I'm convinced, was an expression of national identity, sort of a self-satisfied pride in their separateness, in going it alone, even though they weren't alone. They were a significant member of NATO, for example, and active in the UN, to which they'd contributed one of the first Secretary Generals. This was also the time when the offshore Norwegian oil fields were under development, and keeping those options open may also have played a role. .

Q: Well how did you find being a young single officer there, socially?

NEITZKE: As the Ambassador's aide, I was included in many events, dinners and other things that I otherwise might not have been. They were often interesting. Away from the Embassy, however, while I enjoyed myself, I clearly didn't take adequate advantage of the situation. For some of my colleagues who were single or separated, however, it was more like Christmas every morning. It wasn't completely out of control, but...

Q: There are other posts, Rio de Janeiro is the same.

NEITZKE: I'd never seen anything like it, even in college.

Q: Well, was there much of a Norwegian community in the United States? Were they active, or were they more like in Lake Wobegon?

NEITZKE: As I think I said, I grew up just 60 miles from Lake Wobegon. And we were all way above average.

Q: Norwegian bachelor farmers.

NEITZKE: The Scandinavian community was pronounced where I grew up. The Swedes told Norwegian jokes and the Norwegians told Swedish jokes, and they both told Finnish jokes, and so on, you know, the kind of national or ethnic put-down jokes you hear in most countries. But I don't recall the Norwegian-American community being a significant player in anything when I was in Oslo. Later in my career, working on Eastern European issues, I found their expats and hyphenated Americans more involved and occasionally difficult to deal with, but not the Norwegian-Americans.

Q: Well, is there anything else we should cover before you left there?

NEITZKE: Perhaps just to note that even back then many young officers didn't psychologically sign on up front to a lifetime career in the Foreign Service. Rather, you may have decided to give the Service a look for a tour or two before making a more lasting commitment. Then gradually the interesting tours accumulated and you found yourself drawn in. Near the end of my time in Oslo, I again thought seriously about law school and about a job feeler I'd gotten from an international youth exchange organization. But I'd also traveled to the Soviet Union with a Norwegian group in the spring of 1974 and spoken with FSOs in Embassy Moscow, so I had a more tangible sense of how different, and more challenging, life could be elsewhere in the Service. While weighing my non-Service alternatives, I was also looking to see what a second tour might offer. I had a bit of negotiating room, and among the jobs I bid on were a number in Eastern Europe. I had my eye on Budapest but was assigned instead to Serbo-Croatian language training, for Belgrade. That sounded interesting, so I put the other options on hold. And after Belgrade, I never really looked back.

Q: OK. You started Serbo-Croat when?

NEITZKE: It's a 10 month course; I started in August of '74. I had two teachers, Father Milosevic, a Serbian Orthodox priest, a formal but likable guy, and Velimir Jovanovic, a younger man, also very personable, laid back, who brought a different perspective to bear and introduced us to some interesting areas of Serbian vocabulary. As you know, there's nothing in English to compare with some of the profanities available in Serbian. Milosevic and Jovanovic worked well together as a team. But I found spending all day every day with three other students in a small room on an upper floor of the Foreign Service Institute in Rosslyn pretty confining. The course was heavy on drills and memorization. In March 1975, when the opportunity arose for me to go out three months early, due to someone's early departure from Belgrade, I jumped at the chance, even though my Serbian at the time was not yet at the level I'd have preferred.

Q: What insights did your teachers convey to you about Yugoslavia?

NEITZKE: Milosevic and Jovanovic were my introduction to Yugoslavia and to the Serbs, a people that in the best of times can't be beat for warmth and hospitality, but a people also that carried a huge chip on its shoulder over how, as many Serbs would put it, history had cheated and mistreated them. This could manifest itself in strange ways. I recall a taxi driver in Belgrade once blaming a broken traffic signal on the 400-year Turkish yoke. And I once came across speculation by Serbian intellectuals that, had it not been for the Turks, Serbia might well have been the centerpiece of the Renaissance. There was evidence all over the place that the Serbs had a fractured, incomplete national identity, that some of what they did have was pure myth, well beyond the myth quotient in most national identities. Looking back now, after serving two tours in the former Yugoslavia, I see the time we all spent in Serbo-Croatian training in the mid-1970s as the beginning of the subtle embrace of the Serbian people, and intellectual embrace of the Serbian perspective within Yugoslavia, that affected a couple generations of U.S. and other Western diplomats in Belgrade. It was an almost unconscious thing, acquiring this Serbo-centric view of the country, but it was to have a profound effect on how the West responded when Yugoslavia's bloody breakup began in the early 1990s.

Q: Well let us talk a bit about nationalism in Yugoslavia at that time. When I took Serbian, in 1961 or '62, I had two very ardent Serb nationalists who had been officers in the Serbian royal army and had been exiled, hated Tito, hated communism but also had no regard for the Croats and were, I mean, I cannot think of a nicer word than pigheaded about just about everything. What they knew they knew and anything else was dismissed. In later years I was able to draw on this experience, particularly one, Popovic, to understand how the Serbs were acting when things went so terribly wrong in the 1990s.

NEITZKE: Subtlety and self doubt were not Serbian national traits. Milosevic and Jovanovic had few doubts about what was what in Yugoslavia, about who was to blame for its shortcomings. They too were strong anti-communists and Serbian nationalists. There was nothing, however, in that 1974-75 experience to compare with the muted hostility between Serb and Croat language teachers that I witnessed during my refresher Serbo-Croatian course 17 years later, before I went out to Zagreb as Consul General. That was during the Croatian war. People were being killed by the thousands in Croatia. And there was one nasty atmosphere in FSI's Serbo-Croatian division.

But in my 1974-75 language training, there was none of that tension. We were preparing to serve in a country in which the U.S. had serious national security interests. At the same time, we were not being exposed to alternative perspectives on Yugoslav history or the nationality question, which we might have gotten had our teachers been, say, Croatian or Slovene. In Yugoslavia at that time, however, certainly in Serbia, and certainly among most of the kinds of people with whom Western diplomats associated, there appeared to be genuine pride in identifying oneself as Yugoslav. Whereas later, in the 1990s, only a few would still identify themselves as Yugoslav, usually those in mixed marriages.

Q: Well, we both took the course, and it was called Serbo-Croatian. They are teaching essentially the same course now at FSI but as Slovenian-Croatian-Bosnian-Serbian and I guess Macedonian. Yet it is all essentially the same language.

NEITZKE: Much the same, although the Serbs use Cyrillic script and the Croats Latinic. With the possible exception of areas of Kosovo, one can be understood in any part of the former Yugoslavia speaking any variant of what used to be called Serbo-Croatian. But this became a sensitive issue. Slovenian was always sufficiently different from Serbo-Croatian to meet the psychic need for linguistic distinction when that nation broke away in '91. When the Croats began politically to come into their own in the early '90s, however, some linguists began both inventing words and resurrecting words from the past at a formidable rate to sharpen the contrast with the Serbian variant.

Q: Let us talk a bit about your impressions when you went out in 1975 and we will come back to this obviously when we get to the '90s. What was your impression of the officer cadre, Foreign Service Officer cadre, involved in Yugoslav affairs then?

NEITZKE: I was still a young, second tour officer. I wasn't fully aware of that dimension, that there was a de facto Yugo club in the Service. I knew that Kennan had been ambassador in Yugoslavia. I knew that the outgoing ambassador, as I was preparing to arrive, Malcolm Toon, was one of the finest we had. I didn't really know anything about the Eagleburger, Anderson, Scanlan, Zimmerman group, and we should probably mention Scowcroft, who would dominate Yugoslav affairs in the post - Tito years and even into the wars of the early 1990s. Nor was I aware of the Moscow connection of many of the Yugo hands. Many of these guys were exceptionally talented, even by Foreign Service standards. And as in Oslo, I had supervisors who took an active interest in my development - Mark Palmer stands out in that regard. But there was an edge to the work and to the whole atmosphere of the place that I hadn't experienced in Oslo.

Q: We will come back to the inner workings of the embassy a little later, but describe what Yugoslavia was like from the optic of Belgrade when you arrived there in '75?

NEITZKE: It was, as we would later come to view it, Yugoslavia's Zlatna Doba, Golden Age. Internally, the Yugoslav national question, so important and destructive during World War II, was largely subdued, or at least reasonably well hidden below the surface. Everyone was aware, however, of the constant balancing act that Tito had to perform to keep all national elements satisfied that they were getting their fair share of the pie. He had cracked down on both Serb and Croatian nationalists, Rankovic in '68 I think and the Croats in '71. So the issue was not dead; it just wasn't red hot when I was there. If I can digress for a moment, I'd say that what we had in Tito's Yugoslavia at that time was the mother of all group-identity quota systems, in which nearly everything, positions, perks, and so on was apportioned based on national identity. Even senior slots in Yugoslav embassies abroad were filled in this manner. At the federal level, senior offices rotated among representatives of the various republics and autonomous areas.

But the country, however backward it still was in many respects, had a vitality then, a dynamism, that was palpable. Yugoslav guest workers in Western Europe were remitting huge sums to the country. Vikendicas, small weekend get-away cottages, were springing up throughout the countryside. Most Yugoslavs were free to travel abroad, at least comparatively so. The Yugoslavs' vaunted Socialist Self-management system was being taken seriously by West European political theorists. National inter-marriage was on the rise, or so it seemed in Belgrade. The JNA, the army that is, and the LCY, the communist party, seemed increasingly integrated from a nationality standpoint. Even though Belgrade itself was relatively drab, especially in the winter from the burning of low-grade coal, there was a sense of forward movement in the country. This isn't to suggest we were somehow unaware of Yugoslavia's past and didn't worry; we did, about all kinds of contingencies. But our concerns were generally more hypothetical than acute.

Q: You mentioned intermarriage. You are talking about?

NEITZKE: Serbs and Croats intermarrying, mainly, but also, to a lesser extent, Serbs and Croats marrying Bosnian Muslims, Slovenes, Macedonians, and Montenegrins. But very little involving Albanian Kosovars. Let me just add, regarding potentially resurgent nationalism, that in my three years there and projecting as far as we reasonably could into the future, we and other Western analysts always made allowance for the possibility that Kosovo could be Yugoslavia's Achilles heel. The Albanians were not integrating into the country in the same way that the other nationalities at least then appeared to be doing. The birth rate among the Albanian Kosovars was far higher than among other nationalities, and they were much poorer than any other nationality. The sheer demographics of the situation were pushing Serbs out of their ancient religious heartland of Kosovo. Our analyses always made allowance for the Kosovo factor. But no one, at least no one in Belgrade, was then predicting, or even making allowance for, a possible violent resurgence of Serb-Croat or Serb-Bosnian Muslim cross national strife.

Q: Tito was at his, still in full power.

NEITZKE: Very much so. He was getting on in years, and he was somewhat detached from many of the day to day decisions in running the country. And there was a concern that he might be hanging on too long. And, of course, "after Tito, what?" was a vital question, but there was no doubt in those years who was still in control. Jokes were told about Tito behind his back, and some of the public acclaim was forced, and some who'd felt his heavy hand hated him, but there was, too, a genuine respect and admiration from many Yugoslavs for what this guy had done. He seemed larger than life at times, strutting about in his trademark white suit. Bitterness lingered in some quarters from various instances in which he'd dealt roughly with this or that nationalist tendency or personality, but most people, I think, gave him a fairly wide berth to do so.Tito was also a dominant figure, a founding father, of the nonaligned movement. He had been playing that role to the hilt for years, and in the process gained for Yugoslavia far greater influence on the international stage than its size and power would have dictated. Yugoslav diplomats often punched well above their weight, as the Brits say, parlaying their country's nonaligned role into far greater influence than one might have imagined. They were, in fact, the most, perhaps the best word is leveraged, group of diplomats I encountered in my career, with the exception of the British.

Q: I know that in Moscow and in Beijing, for example, Yugoslav diplomats got out and around more than most.

NEITZKE: The nonaligned movement, or NAM, created a structure within which they could move boldly. There was always a nonaligned summit or a nonaligned ministerial or a nonaligned vote of some sort which we and the Soviets had to take seriously. I t seemed to me, and bothered me, that we were always, in a sense, courting them, despite the fact that their actions and votes were often inimical to our interests. We would count it a modest victory, for example, if we could get them to get the NAM to change language that was truly obscene to language that was merely outrageous. The Zionism as racism issue comes to mind. The issue of Cuba also. They played their hand very well.

Q: How would you describe American policy there? And Soviet policy?

NEITZKE: I recall sessions in the FSI area studies course in which Yugoslavia was described as one of the three or four most likely areas which, if mishandled, could spark a third World War or a U.S.-Soviet confrontation. Handling Yugoslavia correctly meant as vigilant observation and analysis as possible and doing all we could, in every sphere of bilateral activity, economic, cultural, military, and so on, to move them closer to our side, so that when Tito died the odds would be greater that Yugoslavia would not fall back into the bloc, and that the Soviets would not be tempted to overplay their hand. That often meant in practice tolerating unhelpful Yugoslav behavior on a range of mainly multilateral issues while doing what we could to mitigate the harm.So there were tensions, but there was also a clear sense that the game was ours to lose, that we were on top in the tug of war with the Soviets. The Soviets, for their part, were also active, probing everywhere, including on military sales and military cooperation.

I should add, however, in contrast to the wildly exaggerated claims of Russian-Serbian brotherhood based on their shared Orthodox faith that were heard in the 1990s, one never heard that in the 1970s in the context of U.S.-Soviet competition in Yugoslavia. Never. We knew that in their internal contingency planning the Yugoslavs paid far more heed to the possibility of a Warsaw Pact intervention after Tito's passing than they did to any potential Western military threat. Of course, none of this was spoken of openly. At the same time, as I mentioned, they were a thorn in our side on a whole host of issues.

Q: What sort of issues?

NEITZKE: Hot button multilateral issues, such as Zionism as racism, Puerto Rico, Korea, Angola, the Horn of Africa. They would vote with the nonaligned against Israel in the UN. They would cozy up to the Cubans; Castro was another dominant player in the NAM. The Cubans, of course, with Soviet aid, were reaching out militarily to try to tip the balance in the Soviets' favor in Third World trouble spots. And then there were the larger, more sensitive bilateral bones of contention, such as the Yugoslavs' belief that we coddled dangerous anti-Yugoslav ï¿½migrï¿½s and hijackers - Croatian nationalists in the U.S. executed a hijacking in 1976, for example - and our awareness that Yugoslav security forces sometimes killed anti-Yugoslav ï¿½migrï¿½s and that they had allowed terrorists to transit their country. So there was plenty to worry about.

Q: I want to come back again to the leadership of the embassy and we will talk about that but you were in the consular section for a year. What were you doing?

NEITZKE: A little of everything. I did welfare and protection work and was also head of the visa unit, my first real supervisory experience. But, as with consular work in Oslo, what I remember most vividly is the welfare and protection work. One case in particular I'll never forget. A girl in her mid-late-teens, the daughter of a wealthy New York socialite family, had been induced to travel to Yugoslavia by a much older man she'd gotten to know in New York, a Yugoslav, and had been taken to a town in Bosnia. We were alerted by her mother, I believe, but it became clear that differences between mother and daughter had contributed to the situation. The case was handed to me. I got a car and driver and we drove through the night, an adventure of its own kind in Yugoslavia at the time, since you might just plow into a horse drawn cart in the middle of a dark road. We arrived and went to the local police headquarters, where the girl was awaiting us with the older man. When it became clear that she was going to leave with us, the man, a large, tough-looking guy, came up to me and said calmly but defiantly that he was going to kill me, not there but in time. I remember his name to this day. Not long thereafter, he was the subject of a Yugoslav security manhunt along the Adriatic coast, when Ambassador Silberman was traveling there and thought to be threatened. We brought the young woman back to the Embassy compound and took care of her for a few days, before putting her on a plane back to the U.S. All the while, there was a fear that this guy was hunting for her and would do anything to get her back. She looked me up a few years later in Washington, a changed person, much matured, and was very grateful.

I also recall the case of an American in his early 20s, a big guy, who had come over, gotten a car and been driving around the country for a couple weeks. The thing is, he had never gotten out of his car, ever. He was a mess, and he was ours to care for. Dealing with his distraught parents and arranging for his care and eventual repatriation took a lot of time and emotional energy. I later got a very moving letter of thanks from his mother.

Q: This is in a period when a lot of young people were traveling around. Many of them went to Turkey and Nepal and came out carrying hashish. Did you get drug problems?

NEITZKE: I don't recall that drugged out American kids, let alone traffickers, were a big problem. Of course, you're never aware of the hundreds or even thousands of perfectly normal young people traveling through your consular district without incident. The other thing I remember from that year is making the rounds alone in my four-wheel drive Jeep through southern Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, looking for U.S. Social Security recipients, trying to verify that they were still alive and entitled to the checks they were receiving. It was not unknown that corpses would continue receiving these checks, since they were so important to the extended family. And, you know, you'd finally find the house in some backwater village and you'd be welcomed like a conquering hero. They'd bring out the rakija and they'd bring out the carp and they'd bring out the cakes, but they couldn't always bring out the Social Security recipient, and so you'd have to cut them off. But I enjoyed those trips. They gave me a level of familiarization with types of people that others, even most, in the Embassy never had.

Q: I climbed up many Bosnian mountains to ask the relatives of deceased Social Security recipients to show me your marble monument, because they claimed that they had put up a monument to the deceased and had charged Social Security for a marble monument and of course it was just a cement slab and they would look a little bit sheepish.

NEITZKE: When I came back from these trips I felt I'd been in a foreign country. In any capital city, amid the diplomatic community, living in embassy housing, not subject to any of the rigors of the host country nationals, life is artificial. If you don't get out among the people, go into the villages and talk to those living on the edge, you can end up with a very distorted impression of the country. So I always thought that in a place like Yugoslavia consular work provided an exposure that was irreplaceable.

Q: Yes. Like I say, I did this for five years and I mean, I just loved traveling in the back woods, in the back hills.

NEITZKE: And they were back hills. There were parts of Montenegro when you would drive by in the four-wheel drive vehicle the jaws would just slacken and the mouths open and they would look at you as though you had just landed from Mars.

Q: I know. To the point of telling the policeman who I was and what I was going to do so I would not- they would not- you did not want to surprise them.

NEITZKE: Right.

Q: Well, how did you find cooperation from the authorities?

NEITZKE: There was a degree of formality and protocol in dealing with Yugoslav authorities that I hadn't expected. How cooperative they were might depend on what you were asking for. If you were persistent enough, you could usually get the meetings you wanted for, say, a visit to a republic capital, although access to communist party officials tended to be more difficult everywhere at all levels. I recall one meeting that I'd tried hard to get with a young communist party official in Pristina, in Kosovo, even then a hyper-sensitive place. I got it, but the meeting was pointless, because when I met with him, with note takers present in a room that was almost certainly bugged as well, the guy was petrified. I had never in my life tried to have a conversation with a man as frightened as he was, lest he misspeak and get in trouble with his party superiors. There was generally less cooperation when you got out into the provinces, away from Belgrade. My most tense experience dealing with Yugoslav officials came during a visit to an American serving a long prison sentence in Bosnia. The prison official demanded that I hand over a note that the American had given me during a supposedly private meeting in a prison room. I played dumb and he finally gave up, but it was tense. Another time, I was trying to track down a Social Security case near the southern border of Macedonia close to Greece, a sensitive area, and somehow I'd wandered off into no man's land. The police in that instance too were not exactly understanding, and gave me a several-vehicle police escort out of the area, but I was never mistreated.

Q: Well do you want to talk now about the ambassadors you served under in Belgrade?

NEITZKE: I mentioned that I just missed serving under Toon. And Carter named Larry Eagleburger ambassador in early 1977. Between those two, however, from mid-'75 until late '76, Larry Silberman was ambassador. It was a curious appointment. He was a very bright guy, energetic, still in his 40s. He had just been Deputy Attorney General, I believe, and had held other sub-cabinet level jobs. His brief tenure in Belgrade was unusual in several respects. He introduced the strangest embassy front office operation I ever encountered. Fairly early on, and in what seemed an unnecessarily humiliating fashion, he fired his DCM, and then did not replace him. As you know, someone has to do the DCM's work and most ambassadors aren't going to do it themselves, least of all a political appointee. Silberman had brought with him to Belgrade a young man named Brandon Sweitzer. As Silberman explained it, Sweitzer would serve him as the Counselor of the Department served the Secretary of State, an odd analogy. Brandon would be his front office advisor and sounding board sort of, and would occupy the DCM's office, I believe, but he would not be the DCM. No one would. Instead, various section chiefs, mainly Charlie York, as I recall, from the econ section, served occasionally as acting DCM. So, organizationally, it was a little dysfunctional.

More importantly, however, Silberman struggled with and never quite figured out how best to play the Yugoslav leadership, the Yugoslav mentality, who they were and how to move them. They were Communists, yes, but not of the Soviet variety. His tendency toward a one-size-fits-all anti-Communist approach contributed, I think, to exaggerated tensions in the relationship during much of his time there. Yugoslav officials bear part of the blame, but Silberman himself made it a more dangerous period for U.S. interests than it needed to have been. His tendency to lecture senior Yugoslav officials on U.S. constitutional law and civil liberties didn't always go down well. One case in particular, however, dominated his Ambassadorship. It involved an unjustly imprisoned American dual national, whom the Yugoslavs accused of spying.

Q: I think he was in a sugar factory.

NEITZKE: That sounds right. And there was little question in our minds that he was innocent, that this whole thing had been trumped up by Yugoslav security types, either to cover up some mistake they had made or deliberately to damage relations with the U.S. It wasn't a small matter; there was no avoiding it. But was it sufficiently important to gamble much of the relationship on, as Silberman nearly did? Maybe, but if you were going to do that, you needed a well thought out strategy, some insight into these peculiar people, and maybe even patience to get you to your goal. Silberman's inclination, however, seemed to be to hammer away at this frontally in Belgrade, and haul out whatever big guns he could find in Washington, in effect placing the relationship on the line. I suspect he and a few others thought, might still think, this was a gutsy, principled approach, but the effect seemed to be to get Tito, who may have been caught off guard when the incident arose, to dig in his heels. When the case was finally resolved, after a probably longer than necessary standoff, and the American was released, Silberman quickly issued a defiant public statement shaming the Yugoslavs and virtually ensuring that for the remainder of his time there he would be kept at arm's length by Tito and other senior officials. And he was, all but frozen out. This could have been very damaging to U.S. interests had Tito begun to falter badly in the period before Silberman left.

Q: In the dismissal of his DCM, I am just thinking back, as I recall, the person involved was Dudley Miller, and I think that somehow or another Dudley Miller's wife or Dudley himself led Silberman to believe he was being slighted.

NEITZKE: I don't know. I never heard that. But look, if you had in this room right now everyone who served under Silberman and they were speaking candidly, you'd get all sorts of strong opinions on the guy. And I suspect Silberman himself would like that. He was divisive, or maybe it's better to say he liked keeping people off balance. I served under a number of political ambassadors. Most of them were talented and came out supremely self-confident yet not fully aware of what the job entailed and concerned to one degree or another whether they would have the full support of the career Service, or how they would get along with us. Silberman was certainly true to that form. He could be difficult to be around. He judged people, embassy officers and Yugoslavs, very quickly, often harshly, and rarely changed his mind, or so it seemed.

Q: I might mention that Judge Silberman is an appeals court judge at the level just below the Supreme Court, still a very powerful person.

NEITZKE: He's also the author of an article published in Foreign Affairs, written after he left Belgrade, in which, as I recall, he argued strongly against allowing FSOs to serve in policy-making positions. The implication was clear: FSOs, with career safeguards, would pursue their own agendas or would be prone to disloyalty, or at least would be insufficiently loyal, to an Administration's political leadership. Now you can cast this argument in whatever detached, intellectual guise you want. But it seemed to me it sprang directly from his experience in Belgrade. We had worked our tails off for him, but he may have felt, especially in the dual national dispute, that he hadn't been supported by senior FSOs in policy positions in Washington. So his article, essentially attacking the professionalism of the Foreign Service, did not sit well with some of us who'd been with him in Belgrade and experienced his unsteady lead there. This idea by the way, the supposed need to keep FSOs out of policy-making positions, was advanced by other Republican political appointees. Silberman's article was of a sort with a later attack on the Service by David Funderburk, a political appointee close to Jesse Helms, after departing his ambassadorship in Bucharest. And another of my own bosses, Ed Derwinski, got in trouble in the mid-1980s when, as Department Counselor, he expressed the same sentiments in an interview he gave The Washington Times.

Q: OK. Let us talk about Larry Eagleburger. Larry had served in Serbia before. When I was there Larry came in as number three in the economic section. Charlie York and Dudley Miller were also there. Larry must have taken to this like a duck to water.

NEITZKE: He was a high flying FSO and had been for a long time before arriving in Belgrade as ambassador in early 1977. He'd held high-ranking positions in both the Department and the Pentagon, I believe. He was still in his 40s, close to Kissinger, and was well regarded all over Washington, especially on Capitol Hill, where he was said to be liked by both parties, partly for his straight forward, tell it like it is, Midwestern manner. He had made his mark in Yugoslavia as Lawrence of Macedonia following the devastating 1963 earthquake in which he lived down there amid the relief community.

Q: I was there before him. I was with a hospital, a MASH hospital. He followed me; I have to put in a little personal aside there.

NEITZKE. He appeared to know the country well, although in retrospect I'd have to reserve on his perception even then of Croatia and Slovenia, and perhaps Bosnia. But he had a clear sense of our interests. And if you could handle the occasionally blustery or teasing way he'd deal with you, and you got on well with him, as most did, you could learn a lot. But there was another aspect to him as well. Although he was the quintessential American Ambassador in Yugoslavia, no one better suited, totally on top of his brief, that same self-assurance seemed at times to morph into cockiness.

Q: What do you mean?

NEITZKE: Well, for example, I recall a trip I made with him to Sarajevo, one of his several introductory trips to Republic capitals. These trips typically included an entourage of four or five from various sections of the embassy and lasted two or three days. On the trip to Bosnia, after a long morning of meetings, factory visits and so forth, we sat down to a heavy, many-course luncheon hosted by Bosnian Republic officials. As the meal progressed, Eagleburger grew so relaxed, seemed so much in his element, that, after one member of our party expressed an opinion, Eagleburger quipped to our hosts, something like, don't pay any attention to him, he's just a spy. Strange, right? Except that the officer in question was in fact the Station Chief, and he didn't find it all that funny. Nor, reportedly, did the Agency. I'm not letting any cats out of the bag here; this guy's identity, and he's now long retired, is well known.

But most of the time Eagleburger was a consummate professional. And given his reputation in the country, his ability with Serbo-Croatian, and, the simple fact that he followed the disliked Silberman, he usually got a warm reception. This isn't to say we didn't have problems with the Yugoslavs during Eagleburger's time there. We did. I recall, for example, accompanying Eagleburger to his first call on the foreign minister to protest an unauthorized transfer of U.S. arms to the Horn of Africa. But the change in the tenor of the relationship from the extreme coolness that characterized Silberman's last months to what many Yugoslavs perceived as the return of a true, longtime friend was obvious.

Unfortunately, I had only one year with Eagleburger; I left Belgrade in March of '78, several months early, having been selected for a new Pilot Threshold Training Program at FSI. And the day before I left, Eagleburger invited me to the residence for what turned out to be a several-hour brunch, much of it one on one conversation with him. He cared about younger officers, and I appreciated that.

Q: How did you find Marlene Eagleburger? She was my consular assistant. I was her first overseas boss.

NEITZKE: Open, engaging, unpretentious. We liked her. And I think they had young children at the time too, which sort of leavened the atmosphere around the residence.

Q: She was another Midwesterner, she was from Chicago, from a German family. Her family owned the Heinemann Bakery, a major bakery in Chicago. Let's talk now about being a political officer. Who was the political section head? What were you doing?

NEITZKE: The Political Counselor was Mark Palmer, a former Kissinger speechwriter. Mark constantly pushed us to think creatively about larger and longer term questions of U.S. interest. And he too cared about his officers, the development of younger officers, and I benefited greatly from working for him. The fact that he'd known Eagleburger in an earlier incarnation and was on friendly terms with him also helped.

But when I initially went to the Political section Silberman was still ambassador, and my work there had an inauspicious start, or rather what might have been inauspicious. My first task was to take notes for Silberman on a call at the foreign ministry discussing a wide range of multilateral issues. Now, that seems pretty basic, just take the notes. Later in my career, I made it a point to tell first-time junior officer note takers what we would be discussing, what level of detail I expected, and the small stuff too, what to take notes in and so forth, just take-it-or-leave-it tips on what works best. I went off to the meeting with Silberman with a tiny notebook, not even a notebook really, thinking that should be adequate. Only en route did I learn that Silberman expected close to a verbatim transcript. I wrote furiously, covering all sides, margins, and crevices of the tiny amount of paper I had. But there wasn't enough of it. And Silberman didn't give you a second chance; if you screwed up the first time, you were dead. The meeting lasted over an hour and covered all manner of issues, with lots of names and acronyms new to me. I could sense Silberman glancing over at me from time to time, wondering I suppose what Neitzke was doing, why he hadn't brought a proper notebook, and was he getting it all? But on returning to the embassy and beginning the dictation to our secretary, I found that I had, in fact, gotten enough or could remember enough of it to fill in the blanks, to Silberman's obvious surprise.

Q: It illustrates a problem we have had in the Foreign Service; I certainly experienced everywhere I went that nobody told me how to do the job. I mean, there was no real training except in the consular course where you looked things up and all but basically-

NEITZKE: A lot of consular work is seat of the pants on the welfare and protection side.

Q: There, that is fine. But things like writing reports and all you kind of learn this-

NEITZKE: Yes and in most instances you have time for a bit of incubation under the guidance of a senior officer, somebody who knows the ropes and has been there.

Q: As a political officer what specific areas or issues did you cover?

NEITZKE: Each of us in the section had an internal brief and an external brief. My internal brief was Montenegro, Macedonia, and Kosovo. That meant following significant events in these areas, leadership changes, tensions, if any, between the Republic and the federal government. You would follow the regional press as best you could, and travel to those areas to meet with people and get a feel for what was going on. My external brief was multilateral issues, UN affairs, and the nonaligned movement. While not quite as bad as the endless reams pumped out on socialist self-management, reporting on the activities of the NAM accounted for a huge percentage of the ink in the mainline papers. This stuff could be terribly arcane and boring, but some in Washington were interested. This was a time when we were constantly being criticized or condemned in nasty NAM resolutions. But slogging through all of this stuff could be a grind.

Q: And one has to point out that the rhetoric or whatever you want to call it, the verbiage that went out on these things was-

NEITZKE: Stupefying.

Q: Yes. Also it seemed written to fill space but not necessarily provide comprehension.

NEITZKE: All of this served the purpose, in Tito's mind, of keeping Yugoslavia's profile high, so that it could not be ignored, and the Soviets would not be tempted, and at the same time trying to nurture a broader sense of Yugoslav nationhood and pride, to cement together a real Yugoslavia. It was an interesting experiment. But the NAM was always a thorn in our side. You might remember Moynihan's famous, brilliant tirade as UN rep in which he cut loose on the NAM - I wish I had the language - in which he mocked these, he said something like, these exalted, self-appointed potentates, these presidents for life, these Third World demigods who dared lecture us on human rights and other matters.

Regarding the NAM, there was a body called the nonaligned information bureau, or something like that. It was an effort by the NAM to create a supposedly non-capitalist, non-socialist global information network, to help the nonaligned get out their version of the truth, to one another and the rest of the world unaffected by Western or other biases. In 1977, I believe, this group convened representatives of all the NAM at a fairly high level in Sarajevo and it was mine to cover, to find out all I could about what was being decided, how it was being decided, who actually wielded the behind the scenes influence, and so on. So I went down and, as an American diplomat, was frozen out of the meetings, not even allowed to enter the conference site. But I went around and chatted up various delegates in bars and cafes and collected enough material for what became a long cable that I thought at best might be plowed through by a couple of dogged readers. To my surprise, we received a cable from the Department with the most fulsome praise I ever received for a report. Again, evidence that they really did take the NAM seriously. Ironically, I later learned that the cable had been drafted by the officer whose position I took in the Policy Planning Staff a year after leaving Belgrade.

Q: Did we feel that the Yugoslavs were a balance wheel on the nonaligned movement or were they out in front, you know, with Castro and the worst of them?

NEITZKE: Castro was among the worst. Tito was not in that category. But the Yugoslavs could be plenty frustrating. They would go off to NAM meetings and come back and tell us that they'd done the best they could to moderate things, you know, they just couldn't budge the others more than a certain amount. But from time to time we'd get cables from our embassies in other NAM capitals telling a different story, suggesting the Yugoslavs had been anything but helpful to U.S. interests. So it was difficult. Egypt was also a major player, as was India, and with a few others these tended to dominate. Collectively they could deliver the vote on any number of multilateral issues. And since in those days we were vying with the Soviets for influence in virtually every Third World nation, you had to pay attention. In retrospect it may seem odd, but then virtually everywhere on earth, including every African backwater, we were vying with the Soviets for influence. Our only real interest in many of these places was to keep the Soviets out. And the Soviets were ramping up their penetration...

Q: Did you get any feel for what other embassies, French, British, German, Italian, in Yugoslavia were thinking at the time?

NEITZKE: I have no recollection that other Western diplomats saw things much differently from the way we did, although some Swedes, I recall, seemed truly beguiled by socialist self-management. We and the Soviets were unmatched in the size of our embassies, and in the breadth of what we were trying to do in Yugoslavia.

What I learned early on is that there are few governments that even try to conduct a truly global foreign policy. Most are constrained by a lack of resources, which also tends to constrain their view of their interests. The Yugoslavs, acting mainly through the NAM, did try to conduct a global foreign policy, to have informed and considered views on all manner of issues and to make their influence felt. In this respect, I thought they outperformed even many Western governments, including some of our NATO allies. But in Belgrade, apart from our British friends and, curiously enough, a couple of extraordinarily well-connected Japanese diplomats, there were not many embassies to which we could turn for fresh information or perspective. On the contrary, we were constantly sought out by other Western embassies. You'd like to have this be more of a two-way street, but I found there and elsewhere later on that it rarely is.

Q: That is the thing I find as I do this oral history, that we are a global power, that nobody else has the reach that we do, and that while we sometimes make terrible mistakes - and I think we are going through a very bad patch right now in the Middle East - we are the indispensable nation.

NEITZKE: That's clearly the case now, but go back to the period we were discussing, the period when Kissinger concluded, based on everything he was seeing, that the Soviets were in the ascendancy. That was the context in which we were still operating even in the early Carter Administration, even though Carter's people tried to shift the emphasis away from, as they put it, an inordinate fear of communism, and toward North-South issues and basic human needs. Yet in one's day to day work as an American diplomat abroad, your competitors were the Soviets and you were rarely in doubt about that.

Q: Did you have any feel for the Soviets and their outreach within the various republics?

NEITZKE: Not as much as we would have liked, obviously. The Soviets themselves, of course, would not share much of anything with us. But we had other means of obtaining information.

Q: I do not want to get into intelligence gathering, but as a political officer did you find that our intelligence agencies were supplying you with pretty good stuff?

NEITZKE: I don't know that I saw everything that was available, but what I did see was useful, in that it provided a different, or more detailed, or more nuanced perspective, or was just something we weren't picking up anywhere else. But it's spotty. Rarely does it provide just what you need when you need it most. There's just never enough of it, especially on the most sensitive issues. Of course, you never know what you're not getting. And much of what you do get is not independently verifiable. And there's a leap of faith, a readiness to believe this stuff is credible mainly because of its origin. It's a leap sometimes made too quickly. For example, a hard wrought, front channel report, compiled from all available non-intel sources, would tend to be trumped by a conflicting intel report. As I was to learn, senior officials in Washington were especially susceptible to crediting as truth anything with a code word on it, even if it conflicted with well-sourced front channel reporting. A couple times later in my career I came across intel that seemed suspicious to me but was having a dramatic impact on policymakers in Washington. We were able to show with timely eye-witness reports that this supposedly reliable intel was essentially baseless. I hope those were rare exceptions. In Belgrade, we were desperate for this stuff. And with back-up sourcing or other means to verify it out of the question, you accepted it as reliable. And I presume it was, for the most part.

Q: Let us talk a bit more about your experiences with the various republics when you would go there. Did you get any feel for a place like say Montenegro?

NEITZKE: My single most vivid recollection of Montenegro is the doorman at the Hotel Crna Gora in Titograd. He was the spitting image of Charles de Gaulle. Beyond that, I went in with the impression that the average Montenegrin was sort of a super Serb, tall, good looking, macho to the hilt. Some of that came from my having waded through "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon." That's how Rebecca West portrayed them. And there were elements of that. They were tough, hardened, not the kind of people you would easily push around. But they had a different perspective from the Serbs. They were much smaller in number, less exposed to external influences and pressures, and sprang from a terrain so rugged that it had to have played a role in shaping them. We were also told that there was a historic connection between the Russians and the Montenegrins.

Q: Oh, the king's daughter, the king of Montenegro, or prince of Montenegro, his daughters married both an Italian and a Russian duke.

NEITZKE: The intermarriage we'd heard about was between Russian officers and Montenegrin women. And we'd heard that Russian was being taught in Montenegrin schools. I wasn't able to judge how much of this Russian-Montenegrin tie was hype and how much was real. There seemed less to it than the Soviets would have had believe.

Q: What sort of a read did we have on the Albanian Kosovars at that time?

NEITZKE: Kosovo was easily the strangest place to travel in Yugoslavia. You could stand in the field outside Pristina where the Turks defeated the Serbs in 1389 and tour the old, frescoed Serbian Orthodox churches. And you could feel there was some substance to the Serbian claim that this was their national heartland. But you couldn't help but notice that there weren't many Serbs around. We had heard from the Serbian side that they were being pushed out, and we knew, as I mentioned earlier, the Albanian Kosovar demographic trends, by far the highest birthrates in Yugoslavia. Still, compared with the forested hills of Sumadija, in Serbia, Kosovo looked pretty forlorn. It was hard to imagine even then that most Serbs' supposed devotion to this land was much more than symbolic. Pristina was the most tense regional capital I visited. Police everywhere. A sense that you were being followed and everything you did was being recorded. There had been inter-ethnic flare-ups at the University. Everyone we spoke with was uptight.

Another important Kosovo-related issue in those years was supposed Albanian irredentism. Since there was almost no reliable information on Albania's intentions, it was difficult to weigh the validity of Serbian concerns. But those concerns were voiced constantly. As strange as Kosovo was then, it was no match for Albania, even based on what the Albanians themselves were putting out. It was hard then to see how or why the Albanian Kosovars would even want to be part of Hoxha's weird experiment. But within Yugoslavia, in embassy projections of Yugoslavia's long term cohesiveness, Kosovo always stood out as an area that might never be fully integrated.

Q: Speaking of these magnificent Kosovo monasteries and all, what about the Serbian Church, not just in Kosovo? What sort of factor was the Orthodox Church?

NEITZKE: This is an aspect of the Serbian identity that I wasn't sufficiently attuned to when I arrived. The deep connectedness between the Orthodox Church and the Serbs' sense of national identity truly manifests itself, as we all later learned, when the nation feels threatened. In Tito's Yugoslavia, in the comparatively placid mid-late 1970s, the Church was largely in the background. A far cry from its high profile during the unbridled nationalism of Milosevic's Serbia in the late 1980s and 1990s. The interesting question I think is whether during the 1970s the Serbian Orthodox Church was a force for pan-Slavic cohesion or was more a target of non-Serb suspicions and fears. I think more the latter. But one also needs to look at the role of the Catholic Church in Croatia and Slovenia in that regard. Seen from the Serbian perspective, even in the mid-1970s, the Catholic Church was a threat, an institution on permanent probation, in Serb eyes, in light of its perceived role during World War II.

Q: Well I know, again, I got this from my Serbian Serbo-Croat teachers, the horrors of the Catholic Church in Croatia; the name of the place escapes me but a church where they pushed a lot of Orthodox in and set it on fire.

NEITZKE: You're probably thinking of the Glina massacre. There were a number of such places. And there was Jasenovac, the camp in which so many Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and others were brutally killed.

Q: Yes. During World War II religion became an excuse to kill, a key player in genocide in parts of Yugoslavia. And the Serbs remembered. I got this all the time, what the brothers of St. Francis did to the Orthodox.

NEITZKE: I got the largest dose of that not in Serbia but in Croatia. When I visited Zagreb, a senior ConGen Croat employee escorted me around town and showed me where she had seen a Catholic priest take a Serbian baby and just smash its skull against the wall, as though that one horrific recollection said it all. It's a funny thing, this isolating of historical incidents and trying to critique the role of the different churches in Yugoslavia's demise. There were a lot of truly nasty things going on in Yugoslavia in World War II. It wasn't simply Croats killing Serbs and Jews. Look at what Serbs were doing to Muslims in the Sanjak and neighboring parts of Bosnia. This is historical quicksand in Yugoslavia. Every side had its litany of horror stories and statistics. That's no excuse at all for what the Croatian state did in World War II; the Ustashe were unrivaled in their barbarity, but they're not the whole story.

Q: The Serbs also complained about the Muslims in world War II, some SS Muslim troops or something.

NEITZKE: At the Naval War College in 1990-91, I wrote a long, nearly book-length piece titled Yugoslavia: Was it Ever Meant to Be?, in which I explored some of this. You're struck by what a hodgepodge of nationalities and simmering resentments this country was created out of after World War I and the challenge that confronted Tito after the slaughter of World War II. There were so many skeletons in that closet.

Q: You were dealing with people who had very long memories.

NEITZKE: Propagating cross national hatred was outlawed in Tito's Yugoslavia and severely punished, but one can imagine, in the homes and villages, men pumped up with rakija, singing the songs that memorialized the brutalities that their particular nationality had suffered. Most of this would have been out of sight of diplomats serving in Belgrade. A vibrant economy and prospects for a brighter future could dampen those sentiments. But when times turned bad and you became convinced that your tribe was threatened, perhaps because ultra-nationalists had taken control of all the media, the memories and myths resurface in a much uglier form to justify the unthinkable.

Q: How did the embassy synthesize what they were collecting in Belgrade with Croatian and Slovenian perspectives on what was happening?

NEITZKE: They didn't always. There was a clear delineation of responsibility between the Consulate General in Zagreb, which covered Slovenia and Croatia, and Embassy Belgrade, which covered everything else. If the CG had a view that differed from that of the Embassy, he was technically free to send it in to Washington. But exercising that freedom, if the issue were especially sensitive or the Ambassador felt strongly enough about it, might also get you fired. The Ambassador was overwhelmingly dominant in-country, and Zagreb CGs had to tread carefully. Some were gutsier than others. When I was in Belgrade, for example, and Silberman was enmeshed in the dual national dispute with the Yugoslav Government, he was reporting to Washington that the Yugoslav position represented a calculated decision to chill relations. But our CG in Zagreb, Herb Kaiser, disagreed, read the situation differently, and so reported his own take to Washington, despite what I understand was a none too subtle Embassy effort to get him to stand down. But Herb may have been the exception, or Silberman's heavy handedness may have been the exception. Generally, I suspect, things wouldn't get to that point; CGs would tend to tone down conflicting perspectives, if they had any. When I became CG in Zagreb in 1992, and when I opened the Embassy and became Charge in August of that year amid the Bosnian War, the old CG-Embassy Belgrade relationship changed abruptly and dramatically. Front office perspectives in the two Embassies were radically different, and, for our part, we didn't hold back. There were open, front channel analytical disputes. Belgrade was not happy about its fading prerogatives.

Q: It had not been done before.

NEITZKE: I was reporting frankly what I saw, much of it ugly, based on the enormous number of sources available in Zagreb at that time. But it was not the way Embassy Belgrade saw things, and they were used to being better informed, or thinking themselves better informed, and prevailing. And that had ended.

Q: You would think that our embassy in Belgrade at the time, back in the mid-1970s, would have tried hard to report honestly on all of Yugoslavia, on all perspectives.

NEITZKE: Yes, but I think this varied by Ambassador, and the period when we were dealing with the touchy dual national case and its aftermath, Silberman's tenure, may have been an aberration. I'm not suggesting that differences of perspective between the CG and the Embassy were infrequent, only that I suspect comparatively few of them were as significant as the one I cited. Given the Ambassador's overriding authority, Zagreb CGs were going to be reluctant to assert a strong counter viewpoint on, say, the long-term viability of Yugoslavia or the contentedness of the Croats and Slovenes in the Yugoslav Federation, although Zagreb CGs would almost certainly have had a more nuanced feel for the latter issue. And there were many Croats and Slovenes in leadership positions in Belgrade. Stane Dolanc, a Slovene, was Executive Secretary of the LCY and very close to Tito. So one had a sense even in Belgrade that you were also hearing from Croats and Slovenes, although these would have been the Croats and Slovenes most dedicated to Yugoslavia.

And it's not as though Embassy officers didn't travel to Zagreb. There were major events, such as the annual fall international trade fair, where the U.S. would have a pavilion. And the nuclear reactor being installed by an American company in Krsko, Slovenia would also draw embassy visitors. Nonetheless, there was a notable tendency for Western diplomats in Belgrade to view Croats, at least the ones who hadn't come to Belgrade, as under suspicion, as needing to be watched carefully for any factional tendencies. At a more gut level, the unspoken take on Croats among Western embassies - even if never characterized so bluntly - was that they were sort of, at best, ungrateful whining coffeehouse intellectuals who had not paid their dues in Yugoslavia as the Serbs had done in World Wars I and II and, at worst, anti-Yugoslav aircraft hijacking saboteurs, basically. Again, that's much rougher than we would ever have characterized it but that was the sense that one had in Belgrade of some of "those people up there."

Q: Yes, well, it wasn't just not paying their dues. They were essentially seen as being on the wrong side during World War II.

NEITZKE: True, but in the end we also cut off Allied aid to the Serbs, to Mihailovic and the Chetniks. But the notion that the Croats and Slovenes had not paid their dues was broader than that. At the time of Yugoslavia's founding, the Serbs felt, rightly, that they had spilled most of the blood that made a South Slav state even conceivable, that the Croats and Slovenes had, in a sense, been offered shelter in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from their former Austro-Hungarian overlords, that they owed a debt of thanks to the Serbs and should have graciously acceded to a guiding Serbian hand in the running of the new state. From Belgrade's perspective, the Slovenes, and especially the Croats, had never accepted these generous terms of membership, had behaved atrociously in World War II, and by the 1960s and 1970s had given rise to elements actively seeking the destruction of the Yugoslav state.

Q: I was once stuck on the Island of Crete, awaiting a trial of some American drug smugglers, and with time to kill went with my interpreter to the only movie in town, The Battle of Neretva, a Yugoslav movie. And I kept having to tell my interpreter that, no, those are the Bulgarians; no, those are the Romanians; these are the Chetniks. I mean, you had to take a long course to understand who was doing what to whom.

NEITZKE: Part of what Tito manufactured as a national consciousness to combat the reality of wartime slaughter, and obviously it was not ultimately successful but it served its purpose for a number of decades, was that the predominant feature of the war was the rise of the Partisans into a great, cross-national anti-fascist force. There was an active Yugoslav film industry that churned out one film after another, all crude by Western standards, reenactments of major partisan victories where the good guys prevailed.

And the highway between Zagreb and Belgrade, the main highway traversing the country was the Bratstvo and Jedinstvo, Brotherhood and Unity. Again, it's fascinating to me that Tito was able to fashion a nation out of a bloodbath and hold it together with a strong arm but also a dynamism and a certain mythology that actually seemed real for decades.

Q: What about Congressional Delegations visiting Belgrade? Did you get many of those?

NEITZKE: We did, and some were memorable. It's where I first came across Charlie Wilson, for example, and met Senator Dole. But most, as you might imagine, preferred to do their fact-finding in Dubrovnik or somewhere else on the coast. Unlike my later experience in Zagreb in the '90s, I wasn't overly impressed with the caliber or seriousness of some of these guys; it seemed much more vacation than business. One that I'll never forget, led by House Speaker Carl Albert, culminated in a big formal dinner in Novi Beograd, where the guest of honor, feeling no pain whatsoever, rose precariously to his feet to toast the valiant people of Yugoslovakia, wherever that was.

Q: I think we have all had experiences like that, but somehow the nation survives. Do you want to add anything before we move on?

NEITZKE: Just to note that, while researching my Naval War College paper in 1991, I read many academic analyses compiled in the early 1980s on the long-term viability of Post-Tito Yugoslavia. None foresaw the destruction of Yugoslavia. Indeed, most of them gave early post-Tito Yugoslav leaders high marks for their efforts to hold the country together. They did not foresee anything like the violent disintegration that ensued in the 1990s. I stress this because, when Yugoslavia finally imploded, many academic experts on the Balkans acted as though they'd seen it coming all along. They hadn't.

Q: This is sort of a contemporary note but I think one has to look at the role of individual leaders in this. If you had not had such a devilish concoction of leaders in Yugoslavia, you might not have had this blow up.

NEITZKE: Maybe not. Perhaps not just then, but eventually something was going to give, I think. On the leadership issue, I recall Warren Zimmerman, our last Ambassador to Yugoslavia, once wrote that he felt "up to (his) ass in pygmies."

Q: Exactly. Well then, you left when?

NEITZKE: March 1978. I left Belgrade three months early. I'd been chosen to be in FSI's Pilot Threshold Training Program. This was one of several attempts over the years to teach management skills to mid-level officers. The idea was that most FSOs, even some of the best FSOs, tended toward solo acts and never became effective managers. This was an attempt to remedy that. There were about 30 in this class, none of us volunteers. It lasted about three months, was the source of some lasting friendships, and ended in a near mutiny.

Q: Why, what happened?

NEITZKE: A combination of things. First, I think it's hard to teach effective management in the classroom. Discrete skills could be demonstrated, such as ways to handle difficult personnel situations. You could talk about setting goals, prioritizing, delegating, and so forth. You could do some role-playing. And you could learn about various laws and regulations. And we did some of that. But the caliber of the trainers was uneven at best. And too much time was filled by lower ranking Department officers talking to us about what their offices did. This program was being run at a time of large cutbacks in the Department and it took 30 mid-level officers out of the workplace for three months. The plan was that, once this pilot program passed muster, all mid-level officers would be run through it.

Q: One of the problems with these things is always taking people out of the assignment cycle for long periods.

NEITZKE: It might have been justified if it had done what it was supposed to do, but too much of this program was a waste of time and money.

Q: Anything else? You said it ended poorly?

NEITZKE: At the outset, when FSI assumed the course would need just a little fine tuning, they invited our candid feedback. But as much of that feedback turned critical, the welcome mat was withdrawn, and the course managers became pretty defensive. There was an awkward attempt made to entice certain participants to lead the rest of the class toward a more favorable reaction. I declined. I really didn't think this thing could be salvaged. A couple others took up the offer and began promoting the program. But on the final day, with FSI's leaders in attendance, I asked for an open vote on whether we thought the program was worth preserving. A large majority voted no. So there was some tension.

Q: OK, well, whither after that?

NEITZKE: One of the benefits of leaving Belgrade early was that I got back to Washington without assignment and had time to look to go around looking for one on my own. The job I got was Special Assistant to Tony Lake, the Director of Policy Planning. This is in the Carter Administration, the Vance State Department.

Q: Now that you are a Grey Beard or nearly so, for somebody coming into the Service reading this account, what advice can you offer on job-hunting in the Department?

NEITZKE: No one's ever called me that before. I'm not sure I like that term. And on jobs I have no prescription. But since you asked. For a young officer, even a very talented one, there can be a lot of luck involved, both in landing a particular job and in what that job ultimately entails. You might, for example, be assigned to a sleepy, backwater post overseas that suddenly explodes on your watch, creating a unique opportunity for you to shine. And the hunt, even for an older officer, the hunt for that next great job can be daunting and demeaning. I hated job hunting. I know it's part of the game, and I did it. But I never liked running around trying to sell myself to prospective bosses, partly because you never knew whether a job was really open. There's often a wired or front-office candidate, and the interviews are sometimes a sham. My getting the Policy Planning job had a lot to do with timing. I got to my harried personnel counselor one day in a moment when he wasn't otherwise preoccupied. He had just dealt with another of his clients, Lake's then-Special Assistant, who wanted to move on to something else but needed a replacement. So my counselor sent me up to S/P to interview, first with the incumbent, who sent me on to Lake's principal deputy, Paul Kreisberg, who in turn sent me in to see Lake. The chemistry was good, I guess, and they hired me. But there's no prescription. Any doubts on that score were removed when much later, toward the end of my career, I myself was a senior assignments officer and had as my clients some one-third of the FSO-1s and senior officers in the Service. Every day in that job I saw just how arbitrary and capricious much of our assignments process was. And it's not a small thing when you consider that the assignments and posts that one gets by hook or by crook define your life to a large extent.

Q: A little like the visa process. For a visa applicant, you know, it sometimes depends which consular officer they get.

NEITZKE: True. I recall that from my own visa work. Some top officers in the Service claim, and I've heard this repeatedly, that they never had to hunt for a job, that the jobs always came hunting for them. It's possible that one's corridor reputation is so strong, especially if you serve mainly in one region, that you may virtually have had your pick of great jobs time and again. I've known a couple officers like that, but it's extremely rare. Usually, even among the so-called water-walkers, there were other factors at play.

Q: Such as what?

NEITZKE: Well, when I entered the Service, the surest way for a strong young officer to rise rapidly was to gain the attention early on of one of the top FSOs in the Department, who could become your mentor, in a way your godfather. They could protect their young charges, protï¿½gï¿½s, and could improve the odds of their getting jobs with strong growth potential. I know a number of top officers whose careers were guided from an early stage by these sorts of relationships. Of course, most of these young officers were very strong to begin with. But analyzing why some officers with great potential "made it," so to speak, and others didn't fare as well, the difference was often that the former showed an uncanny ability early on to ingratiate themselves with senior officers who could help them. And - and this was equally important - they attached themselves to senior officers who remained in the Service through the key mid and early senior part of the younger officer's career. Some were so adept at this that they could attach themselves seriatim to one godfather after another, but that was rarer. Of course, I'm thinking mainly of male officers in this respect. Throughout my career there were at various times different systems and guidelines, often even more capricious, affecting the assignment and advancement of female officers.

One other point while we're on this. Most of these rapidly rising officers in my generation, the ones for whom job hunting was rarely a chore, were not only smart and ingratiating, they executed well, analyzed, synthesized, and drafted quickly, concisely, and with a sharp policy sense. And they were strong bureaucrats, in the best sense of that much-abused word. But unlike the generation of, say, Eagleburger, Habib, Enders, Hinton, and others, most of the stars of my generation made a virtue of not rocking the boat, of having no sharp edges, of rarely giving offense of any kind to superiors, and needless to say, of shunning open dissent and dissenters. Very few have ever taken a serious, career-threatening policy stand on principle. I think that's a sad commentary on the generational change in the Service's best and brightest. Maybe it was always that way and I'm just more sensitive to my own generation, but I don't think so.

Q: Okay, it is '78. You went up to the 7th floor. Tell me about Tony Lake and what you did in Policy Planning.

NEITZKE: Lake had been among the rising stars of his Foreign Service generation, until, when working for Kissinger at the NSC, he resigned in protest of our Vietnam policy. He is among the brightest people I've ever met. When I knew him he was a workaholic, a perfectionist, ethically conscious almost to a fault, somewhat stilted in manner, but a fair and decent guy. He had one of the toughest, most time-consuming, and most influential jobs in the Vance State Department. Although his position was formally at the Assistant Secretary level, he was among the three or four State officials closest to Vance.

I should probably add something here about what Policy Planning actually does. People seem to have the impression that Policy Planning's purpose is to sit back, analyze, and produce long-range policy think pieces for the Secretary. And I'm sure that during some of the time between Kennan's and Lake's Directorships of S/P, that was the case. But that was not what Vance wanted or how Lake ran his shop. A better description of S/P under Lake would be a non-stop bureaucratic guerilla warfare unit, taking no prisoners, and prominently inserting S/P's position into virtually every briefing or decision memo reaching Vance or the Under Secretaries. And for that, S/P under Lake was not much loved around the building, but it was respected.

As for long-range policy planning, unless you mean, say, the 6-month to a year horizon, there just wasn't time for it, and there wasn't much of a market. Leaving aside the enormous difficulty of making credible long-term predictions, the typically frantic policy process within the Executive Branch amid enormous political pressures from outside the Administration, renders most attempts at longer-range thinking and planning quickly irrelevant. I'm not saying Lake's S/P never produced these - in the summer of 1980 we produced a whole raft of second-term think pieces for the White House, for example - but they were rare. On most days the staff was up to its shoulders in dozens of different policy squabbles throughout the building and with other agencies.

Q: You said Lake was especially close to Vance. How so?

NEITZKE: Lake was among a very small group of people who met with Vance often on all manner of issues, if not quite secretly, as least very separately from the larger group and staff meetings Vance had with Assistant Secretaries and above. I heard this referred to as Vance's "teeny group." And it afforded those few officials the opportunity to weigh in with Vance in a way most others could not. Although Lake was not the type to flaunt his special entrï¿½e to Vance, it was known around the building that he had the Secretary's ear, and that helped empower the entire S/P staff in their running policy battles with the bureaus. S/P's views didn't always prevail, but they usually did, and the staff was almost always in the thick of the fight.

Lake specifically recruited for the staff people who were comfortable entering the fray and effective at getting their way, backed by Lake's reputation and his or his deputies' intervention when necessary. And it's fair to say, I think, that many of the bureaus were not used to this more intrusive S/P involvement in the framing of their decision memos and the argumentation of the options.

Q: Who did you say was Lake's deputy?

NEITZKE: His senior deputy was Paul Kreisberg, one of the brightest, finest FSOs I ever worked for. Sandy Berger, later national security advisor in the second Clinton Administration, had the rank of deputy, I believe, but was basically Vance's chief speech writer. Another of his deputies was Jeff Garten, an economist and Asianist, I believe, who later resurfaced in government as a senior official in Clinton's Commerce Department. And among the staff were such officers as Arnie Raphel, who went on to be Vance's executive assistant, then Ambassador to Pakistan; Bob Gallucci, who headed the North Korea nuclear negotiation in the Clinton Administration; John Holum and Carol Lancaster, significant players in the international aid and development community; and many others, some of whom also resurfaced in the Clinton Administration.

Q: You were there from '78 to when?

NEITZKE: '78 to '80. In my first year I was Lake's Special Assistant, and for my second year he asked me to become a member of the staff with a portfolio of issues of my own.

Q: Alright, Special Assistant, what did you do?

NEITZKE: S/P had a professional staff of over 20, nearly all senior or super grade, nearly all extremely bright and hard-charging, a few somewhat eccentric, and none short on ego. Each covered a cluster of policy issues, geographic or functional. They were assisted by a large secretarial staff, for whom I served as recruiter, coordinator, and reviewing officer. My main task was to help keep things running as smoothly as possible so that Lake and his deputies could focus on substance. That meant mediating all kinds of personal and personnel and logistical disputes, making sure that organizational problems didn't fester, making sure that staff could get to Lake when they needed to or at least get timely feedback from him, ensuring that papers - nearly always under tight deadlines - moved to Lake and the deputies, and from them onward to the Secretary and Under Secretaries, as quickly as possible. In a sense being Lake's eyes and ears out among a large, aggressive staff. A Staff Assistant helped out, in addition to handling the massive, never-ending incoming paper flow. So there was that, very time-consuming and basically managerial, aspect of the job.

I also spent a lot of time on something called the Priorities Policy Group. This was a very senior, very small group of which Lake was a member, whose job was to review annually, on a Department-wide basis, whether State's financial and personnel resources were being deployed to best achieve its stated objectives. This was the Carter Administration's iteration of a hardy perennial, and almost impossible, chore. State usually had a hard time making anything other than very marginal changes in resource allocations, and even those were not always the result of hard-headed choices between competing policy priorities. Nonetheless, this whole exercise began with a Global Policy Message to all bureaus and posts outlining the Administration's foreign policy objectives and was followed by a Goals and Objective process involving each bureau and post. One of my jobs was to coordinate and edit submissions for the Global Policy Message, draft the instructions for bureaus and posts on what was expected of them, and help review their submissions. I also sat in for Lake on occasion in PPG meetings and got to float some ideas of my own. How much good the PPG exercise did, I'm not sure. At least it forced people to look beyond their daily preoccupations and try better to focus limited resources on specific objectives. And in that regard the Carter Administration's overarching perception of the world, and many of its foreign policy objectives, were quite different from its predecessor's.

Q: Can you explain, give some examples?

NEITZKE: The Carter team had come in with a very different take on the world from that of the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger Administrations. It was determined not to be straightjacketed by what it saw as an earlier inordinate fear of communism, a rigid East-West perspective on the world, every move calculated to counter the Soviets. Instead, it focused much more on North-South issues, on foreign assistance, and on meeting what it called Basic Human Needs. It regarded authoritarian military regimes very warily and went after human rights abusers wherever possible. Even though I entered S/P a year and a half into Carter's term, there was still an atmosphere of newness and freshness. Of course, critics would say it was less fresh thinking than untempered naiveti¿½. This was also the pre-Iranian hostage period, which I will come to, and before interest rates spun out of control and so forth. So it was a-

Q: Pre-Afghan too?

NEITZKE: Pre-Soviet Afghan invasion, pre-fall of the Shah, pre-taking of Embassy hostages in Tehran, that's correct. The whole atmosphere changed later.

Q: Did you see much evidence of the Carter Administration's view that we could do business with the Soviets? Carter put Ambassador Watson into Moscow as our ambassador there hoping that this would be more of a technocratic, non-ideological approach, maybe we could do more business with Moscow. I mean, it was a-

NEITZKE: As I mentioned, the abandonment of what they saw as a Kissingerian preoccupation with communism was a hallmark of early Carter Administration policy. That gave way, some might say inevitably and foreseeably, to a harsh realization of what the Soviets were about, and to a near obsession later in Carter's term with countering the Soviets in every corner of the globe. One of the assignments I had in my second year in S/P was to help coordinate a State-led initiative, sort of a counter-propaganda effort, to blunt the inroads being made by the Soviets and their Cuban proxies all over the Third World. This was the heyday of what was termed Soviet Third World adventurism. The Carter Administration's determination not to become bogged down in an East-West struggle gave way to the reality that that struggle was being waged by the Soviets, aggressively, and that we needed to respond.

Q: Well also did you feel that Zbigniew Brzezinski at the NSC (National Security Council) might hold contrary views? I mean, he has always characterized as being essentially hard-line in his outlook towards the Russians.

NEITZKE: I don't know how Brzezinski felt about the articulation of that early Carter Administration approach. I suspect he could not have been all that comfortable. Later, especially after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, Brzezinski's harder headed view of East-West realities would seem to have been vindicated.

Q: What was the feeling toward Cyrus Vance from your vantage point as the Administration's overall perspective on East-West issues began to change?

NEITZKE: I was overseas at the beginning of the Carter Administration, but early in my assignment to S/P I came to see Vance and Warren Christopher, his deputy, and Lake to a lesser extent, as not only idealists but almost ideological purists, in a sense. They had a very definite view of the world and of what America could and must do to advance democracy and human rights and alleviate suffering. The same could perhaps be said of Kissinger's views, that they were equally rigid, albeit near the other end of, say, the realpolitik spectrum. Let me give one example of how this more purist or absolutist view would manifest itself in everyday policymaking. I recall a very frustrated S/P staffer once emerging from a two-hour meeting chaired by Christopher, the subject of which had been what precise arms could be sold to a certain Latin American government which had a checkered human rights record. After endless debate and moral hairsplitting of an almost Jesuitical nature, the staffer reported, not unlike what one occasionally heard later about many Clinton Administration policy debates, the group decided that, yes, we could provide the government in question with the arms - but not the ammunition. And that is sort of emblematic of an attitude, which may have emanated from President Carter himself, that when it manifested itself in concrete, yes or no, foreign policy decisions could appear naï¿½ve, wildly unrealistic, or just unworkable.

Q: You were up among some people, hard chargers, with pretty large egos. Working on high-level policy is what those determined to move to the top in the Foreign Service want to do, get to where they feel they can really do something. Did you find yourself having to deal with a lot of difficult personalities? And did you get a feel for, you know, the less attractive side of some of the people rising to the top?

NEITZKE: Well, yes, dealing with difficult and demanding personalities was part of the job. And if you were an overly sensitive sort or terribly thin-skinned, you wouldn't last long in that environment. But some of the hardest-charging, most rapidly-rising officers were also very decent people on a personal level. I mentioned, in S/P, Arnie Raphel, for example, and there were others. In fact, very few people were gratuitously nasty, although some were. But the perceived importance of the work, the sheer volume of it, the time constraints, and the constant clash of views among very bright people in the policy-making process didn't always bring out everyone's best side. Large egos? Yes. An exaggerated sense of self-importance? Of course. But humility, self-restraint, and quiet appeals to sweet reason weren't going to get you very far in those policy fights. This was my introduction in spades to how policy actually got made in Washington, and it was not always edifying. The more important the issue, the sharper the clash of viewpoints and, often, the sharper the clash of egos.

A couple aspects of this process struck me as especially curious. First, meetings called to resolve high-level policy disputes, among, say, assistant secretaries or their deputies from several bureaus, almost never did so. Not really. Honestly, I can't remember even one time, and certainly not at the S/P level or above, when in a meeting on an important issue one side simply conceded the superiority of another's arguments, leading to an agreed common position, although sometimes bureaus would compromise a bit and ally with one another in taking on other bureaus. People would usually come to the table heavily armed not just to articulate their bureau's position but to subtly, or not so subtly, hint that if their position were not agreed to they would find another means to prevail, they would reclama and fight on. Though usually unstated, this might be by appealing to higher ups, even the Secretary himself, or by bringing in other agencies on their side, appealing to the White House, leaking to the press, and so forth. The first time you listened to the exchanges in these meetings you might think you were hearing a mature, adult exchange of contrasting views on how to proceed, but what you were actually witnessing was a sort of pro forma power dance. The ultimate decision, to the extent that anything was ever finally decided, would usually turn on who had the most power, and that often meant who stood closest to the most senior person not at the table who was interested in the issue.

The other, related curious aspect of decision-making I'd mention here is how often senior players' influence on the outcome of an issue depended more on how close they were to the Secretary than on their substantive grounding in the issue, which might be extremely limited. Younger FSOs tend to think that policy influence is based largely on expertise; because that's what their limited influence springs from; they're the U.S. expert on country X or issue Y, for example, and so they're one up on everyone else when the debate gets to the more complicated aspects of the issue. In real life higher up, however, the expert views in one's brilliant memo might be trumped by brief comments from someone far more senior who knows much less about the issue but has direct access to the Secretary, knows what else is on the Secretary's mind, and enjoys his confidence.

Q: I am reading a book now about Iraq called Imperial Life in the Emerald City, written by a newspaperman. He brings out that early on in our occupation of Iraq senior people would gather to make decisions and they would debate the issues at length but they were not responsible for implementing their decisions. The end result was the wrong decision because it was decided by people who would not have to deal with the problem.

NEITZKE: Most of the people I encountered at the upper reaches of the State Department, the NSC, and most other agencies were extremely intelligent, articulate, and well grounded in the facts. Since there are very few simple issues at that level, debates could go on endlessly, and when they did the decision ultimately reached, especially if it reflected a lot of forced compromise, might well be at odds with what was actually needed by those who would have to implement it.

Q: During the period you are discussing I was on the country team running the consular section in Seoul, Korea, and Carter's human rights policy was emerging. We were very nervous. Carter had also talked about pulling out the Second Division, which was sort of a ploy but might have tempted North Korea to do something dangerous; it was only about 40 miles away from us. The whole human rights policy seemed to be a little bit nice but at odds with the real dangers we were facing. This must have happened elsewhere too with his human rights policy. There must have been acrimonious debate in the Department.

NEITZKE: Perhaps on the where and how of it, but I don't think there was much acrimony over emphasizing human rights per se. The Carter Administration seemed almost obsessively committed to it. But put this in context. The Carter team didn't invent this emphasis. It was partly Wilsonian. Some of this had been in the UN human rights charter and various declarations. And there was the Helsinki Final Act, which crowned CSCE, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. That had been signed in the Ford Administration, in the summer of 1975. CSCE's so-called Basket Three dealt with humanitarian affairs and included a commitment by the signatories to respect the human rights of their own people. That was a breakthrough, underappreciated at the time, making a government's treatment of its own people a legitimate topic for bilateral and multilateral dialogue. The Soviets were never able to walk that back.

Although I wasn't involved in it, the formal follow-up conference to Helsinki took place in Belgrade while I was there, from the fall of 1977 to early spring of 1978, and again, Basket Three issues figured prominently. So that's part of the backdrop against which Carter was pushing human rights. It wasn't exactly a shot out of the dark. But it may have seemed more like that because of the kind of people who swept into the State Department with the new Administration. Even though I showed up over a year later, one still heard stories about the occasionally nasty atmosphere surrounding the departure of the Kissinger crowd and the arrival of the newcomers. They included, in addition to Lake, Dick Holbrooke, Bill Maynes, Dick Moose - all former FSOs, I believe - Pat Derian, and others. Some of these had, well, if not quite a chip on their shoulder, or a determination to settle old scores, at least a very strong commitment to charting a new course, which centrally involved enhancing international respect for human rights.

Q: Did you find dealing with Pat Derian a little bit like dealing with an elemental force?

NEITZKE: I didn't deal with Pat Derian at all, but I recall that those who did considered her a formidable player.

One can look back and say that their fixation on human rights was naï¿½ve and was ultimately swept aside, except I'm not sure that it ever was. Although they may have appeared inept in applying the policy on the Korean Peninsula, as you suggest, or in parts of Latin America or other places, they left behind something that has been very difficult for practitioners of realpolitik to ignore. One area in which Carter's human rights policy tracked those of his predecessors and successors, however, was in the Middle East. It was as though they drew a circle around the whole oil-producing area and exempted it.

Q: Where you stand on that depends on where you sit. Of course, Korea was not a complete exception to the policy, but the military threat was so great that it meant careful planning was necessary. I give great credit to the Carter Administration for pushing this because it has changed the game all over the world. But at the time it seemed a bit naï¿½ve.

NEITZKE: As I said, Carter didn't invent this. His Administration just made it more central, more frontal.

Q: Well, is there anything else we should cover on that first year you spent in Policy Planning?

NEITZKE: One Thing perhaps. It was also the S/P Special Assistant's job to handle the Department's Dissent Channel. Working in Lake's name, I was supposed to see that all incoming Dissent messages got to Department principals, task out the drafting of responses, often done by S/P Members, make sure our answers were responsive, coordinate clearances, and get the answers back as quickly as possible to the dissenters. This was another eye-opener. Given how much was going on and how aggressively so many policy battles were being fought, I expected that the Dissent Channel would be more or less brimming with dissents, reclamas, creative ideas, and even waste, fraud, and abuse-type messages.

But it wasn't. The Channel was rarely used, and almost never for a frontal challenge of a major, substantive policy. There were exceptions to this, but not many. I reviewed the Dissent Channel files going way back and found that it had never been much used.

Q: Well, it was intended as sort of a safety valve, was it not?

NEITZKE: Yes, in theory at least, that was the idea. During Vietnam, when some FSOs were going public with their dissent, through leaks to the press mainly, Kissinger was persuaded to set up the Dissent Channel, with the promise that Dissent messages would receive the attention of the highest levels of the Department - in hopes that this would keep dissent in-house. Chiefs of Mission and Assistant Secretaries could not prevent subordinates from using the Dissent Channel, or even edit their messages, or retaliate in any way against dissenters. In practice, however, it took a very brave, or perhaps a very alienated soul to stick his or her neck out, and few did. The thing is, for an officer to know enough about a policy, to know it expertly enough to have any chance of truly grabbing the attention of policy makers, he or she would probably have to have been centrally involved in its formulation or still be involved in implementing it. And in that case, formally dissenting could effectively cost you the trust and confidence of your superiors, even if there were no formal retaliation. It would be tough to keep doing your job. In those few instances when policy differences gave rise to broader, serious dissent in the Service, and frankly only Vietnam and Bosnia come to mind, the dissent was so visceral, so strong that some dissenters were on the brink of resigning. They wanted a major change in policy; they did not simply want a formal means of communicating their views to the 7th floor.

As it was, some who used the Dissent Channel were repeat or chronic dissenters whose arguments were often not very persuasive on their face. And some who used it seemed to want the aura of dissent without actually offering a head-on policy challenge. Sort of safe dissenters, as it were, earning a personal integrity reference for their evaluation report but without risking any real heat. Some dissent messages were clearly heartfelt but from officers distant from the policy who simply felt compelled to weigh in. And there were, as I said, a very few insightful, well-argued, brave dissent messages on serious subjects from officers more centrally involved. But, and this is the key point, although all of these messages were in fact brought to the attention of Department principals, none changed policy, or even prompted serious reconsideration of a policy, as far as I could tell. By the time a policy had gone sufficiently awry, or looked to some as though it had, to prompt formal dissent, too many people, too high up, tended to be too invested in it to step back and consider altering it fundamentally.

Q: So what did you take away from this personally?

NEITZKE: It's interesting, because in essence that question arose when I testified in 1996 before the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and the House "Green Light" Subcommittee investigating the Clinton Administration's so-called "green light" to Iranian arms deliveries through Croatia to the Bosnians. I had opposed the decision, one of the eventual effects of which was a dramatically heightened Iranian-backed terrorist threat to American officials in Zagreb and elsewhere. I was asked why I hadn't used the Dissent Channel. I said that based on my personal familiarity with the Channel, I considered it next to useless for changing policy, and in any event had made my concerns clear in regular front channel messages from Zagreb.

Q: Well then, let's move on to your second year in Policy Planning. What issues were you dealing with?

NEITZKE: I had then become a regular member of the staff. I was assigned to ride herd on IO and UN political issues, refugees, terrorism, and immigration. I was also the special projects person, and that actually came to occupy a lot of my time. I did work on my assigned issues, wrote testimony for Vance and Christopher on Southeast Asian refugees, did memos from Vance to the President on a number of issues, and even did some longer range think pieces on these issues for the NSC, looking toward what they then expected would be a second Carter Administration.

Three of the special projects are perhaps worth mentioning. The first had to do with explaining to foreign governments and audiences our boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. The second, which I alluded to earlier, had to do with countering what the Soviets and Cubans were doing all over the Third World. That involved a lot of inter-agency coordination and was done under the direction of Under Secretary Newsom. It was essentially a global counter-Soviet propaganda project, which had some measurable payoffs for us even in the short run.

The third project, on which I worked nearly round the clock for six weeks, resulted from the takeover of our embassy in Tehran in early November 1979. That came as a shock to the Carter Administration. The administration was already on the defensive in a number of areas. On Iran, questions quickly arose about our handling of the Shah, not just his eventual admittance into the U.S. but how we'd dealt with him in the years preceding his fall, how we'd dealt with the opposition, whether the Shah's fall had been foreseeable and whether we'd taken adequate precautions to safeguard American lives and interests in the country. There was real fear in the NSC and at State that the Administration would be charged with having "lost Iran" and would face a torrent of Freedom of Information requests for documents to substantiate that charge. In addition, as you might recall, the Iranians were thinking of taking us to the World Court, where we might face a public airing of 30 years and more of American policy in Iran, amid allegations that the Shah had spirited away tens of billions of dollars that rightfully belonged to the Iranian people.

So quietly, in December of 1979, a crash effort was begun to assemble in one place a collection of chronologies of key documents covering virtually every aspect of our relations with Iran since World War II. We wanted not only to identify all the skeletons in the closet, the issues on which the USG might be most vulnerable, but to be prepared to limit the damage should any see the light of day. Partly to that end, each chronological compendium of documents was to deal with one discreet issue, as far as possible.

It was a massive undertaking done under severe time constraints over, as I said, about a six-week period. A small interagency team was assembled under the joint auspices of State and the NSC. The collecting of the documents, and preparation of summary narratives, was to be done in State, with the NSC intervening whenever necessary to pry loose especially sensitive materials from reluctant agencies.

Lake asked me to work with an INR Deputy Director as sort of co-editors of the project. We drew heavily on the Historian's Office, along with other sources, in first identifying the various issues, or categories of issues, that would need to be covered. Despite the NSC's instruction to all relevant agencies to make available whatever was asked for, we pretty quickly ran into resistance from the CIA, understandably, of course, because that's where a number of the more sensitive skeletons lay. I know that in our post-9/11 world of vastly improved intelligence sharing this might be hard to imagine, but the Agency then was not about to surrender any serious dirty laundry to a State-coordinated effort, even if the White House had mandated it. So there was a lot of pulling and tugging. In the end, with an all-out effort by a lot of very talented people, and with the NSC running interference with the Agency, we compiled a massive amount of material. Our job, the coordinators' job, was to edit the historical overviews of each topic, for stylistic consistency and to try to draw out issues and events which had not been adequately explained, and to make sure that all critical assertions were backed by documents readily at hand. In the end we thought we had gotten most of what even the Agency had to give, although doubts lingered.

Someone leaked the existence of the project to the press in the late summer or fall of 1980. Although I don't think the actual collection of documents was compromised - I had moved on from S/P in the summer of 1980 - this was a time of great tension within the Administration over Iran, the hostages, the failed rescue attempt and Secretary Vance's resignation. And I don't know whether any FOIA requests ever surfaced, but I assume there must have been some. And as for a politically-motivated witch hunt over who lost Iran, the endless hostage crisis lay so heavily on the then-beleaguered Carter Administration, and on the American people, that when the hostages were finally released as Reagan was inaugurated in January '81. I think most people were ready to move on.

Q: What I recall is the long discussion about whether to allow the Shah into the U.S. for medical treatment. I have been interviewing a man who was a junior political officer in Tehran at the time, John Limbert, who was saying that when they heard that the Shah had been admitted they felt they had been hung out to dry, deserted by the State Department.

NEITZKE: There were two aspects of our long relationship with Iran covered in the study I mentioned on which, despite all of our pulling and tugging, we never quite felt we had everything, although we had a lot. One was the full story of the CIA's actions in the 1950s.

Q: This was Roosevelt and what's his name, Mossadegh?

NEITZKE: Our role in the ouster of Mossadegh, the Shah's return, the formation of SAVAK, their intelligence organization, the extent of our assistance to SAVAK, whether we were aware of all that SAVAK was doing to regime opponents, what advice we may have given the Shah about dealing with internal dissent, and so forth. But the other area on which it was most difficult to get all the information wasn't nearly as distant; it was the Carter Administration's own handling of the last year or so of the Shah's rule. For example, did we arbitrarily inhibit official contacts with the opposition in deference to the Shah? How had we so badly misjudged the strength and true nature of the opposition? How could we not have known - or did we in fact know - that admitting the Shah to the U.S. would inflame the situation and instantly endanger our personnel in Tehran? This was extremely sensitive stuff, with lots of agitation and some finger-pointing in what we did see, but no smoking guns. DOD was not all that forthcoming regarding various allegations of corruption in our bilateral military relationship. So, although we uncovered and chronicled a lot, there were doubtless still some secrets unexplored.

Q: Okay. Let's move to the other big crisis when you were there, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. What did you observe at your level?

NEITZKE: I recall being asked to draft some of the earliest guidance sent out to all diplomatic posts on how we viewed the Soviet move and were prepared to react to it. This actually illustrates another interesting aspect of State Department bureaucratics at a high level. I knew next to nothing about Afghanistan, had no background in the area whatsoever, yet I was tapped to pull together the ALDAC cable. And I did so, and quickly, by putting together pieces from people who did know the area and issues, bits of NSC guidance, and so forth. And it was quickly cleared around the upper reaches of the government and changed a bit, but not all that much. Of course, in the days and weeks to follow, much more was sent out, instructions to individual posts and so on, drafted by those who would be handling the issue over the longer term. My point, though, is that when there's a need to get immediate guidance out to the field on a major breaking issue, the job does not always go to the person who has the most expertise on the subject. In this instance, the NSC and the Secretary were comfortable relying on S/P, and Lake was comfortable relying on me, to pull together the draft.

Let me just insert a quick, related anecdote here. I recall Lake once returning from a lengthy, small group meeting with Vance on an important arms control issue. On returning to his office, Lake threw up his arms and started laughing loudly. He'd been pressed to weigh in, and apparently had done so, on a critical issue of which he admitted, to us, knowing next to nothing. It just seemed to strike him, in that moment, as a very strange way to do business, which, of course, it was.

But the fact is, as I mentioned earlier, it happened often, that is, that the people invited to the table to decide policy were not always those, or only those, with a solid grounding on the issues in question. Some were at the table for other reasons, such as their judgment on how a policy might play out domestically in the U.S., or when weighed against other equities of the political party in office, or how the handling of the issue might affect the Secretary's standing within the Administration. Reportedly, all of these additional considerations weighed very heavily, for example, on Warren Christopher's early decisions in the first Clinton Administration to keep Bosnia at arm's length to the extent possible. So substantive expertise is far from the only factor, and often not even the major factor, in determining who gets the Secretary's ear in deciding policy within the State Department.

Q: I have been talking to somebody who has propounded the phrase "expertise is the enemy of policy." I think that if you know too much about something you can screw up the policymakers who want to make workable decisions based on various realities.

NEITZKE: I agree. It's possible to be too close to an issue to be of great use to policy makers. You can even become an obstacle, which is a lesson that especially young officers are reluctant to take on board. When you're starting out, on a country desk for example, or in, say, a political section abroad, you sometimes feel as though substantive knowledge were everything, or ought to be everything. After all, it's the only real weapon, at that stage of your career, that you bring to the game. And it can be heady stuff, to be able to cut someone off, to say they're wrong because of this or that undisputable fact that you've uncovered. But expertise has to be used in conjunction with your reading of the context in which the decision will be made and the practical alternatives before the decision makers.

Q: During the Iranian crisis, Henry Precht was the man who knew everything you could know about Iran. At one point he was forbidden by Brzezinski to come to meetings on Iran because he would keep pointing out where all the problems were.

NEITZKE: This happens. When the Clinton Administration was feeling pressure to deal with Bosnia, for example, there was a tendency to exclude people who knew the most about the issues, in part because they were seen as being too close to the problem, too drawn to one side or the other perhaps, or simply too demanding that serious action be taken when the Administration basically just wanted to do as little as it needed to to protect its political flank. The views of a lot of good people can be dismissed in these circumstances, inconvenient facts never get raised or are quickly shunted aside, policy suffers, and the nation may pay for this later on. On the other hand, it's possible to be too close to an issue for your own good, to become not just intellectually but emotionally enmeshed in it, to downplay the dozen other foreign policy interests an Administration is juggling at any given time as it addresses your issue.

Q: I was watching TV yesterday and Peter Galbraith was talking about what to do about Iraq. And Peter Galbraith, as you will get to, became very much a proponent of the Kurds and he was basically pushing the Kurd line exclusively. There is a tendency toward localitis or going native or what have you.

NEITZKE: There is that sort of classic foreign policy concern about somebody losing sight of the overall problem and, for whatever parochial reason, pushing a particular angle. Washington officials are not at all averse to slapping this label on an embassy or a chief of mission whose advice, or even whose reporting, they just don't want to listen to. Which isn't to say that clientitis isn't something one needs to guard against when overseas. You do need to be conscious of the danger. And this can happen to others as well, non-Foreign Service, working on behalf of one faction in a dispute. I don't know enough about Peter's association with the Kurds to comment on that. Of course, many foreign governments, or foreign factions, employ their own K Street lobbying firms to press their point of view in the debate here. So whether something is clientitis, or something else altogether, can sometimes be hard to tell.

Q: Coming back to the Afghan issue, the Soviet invasion and occupation, were you involved in the response to that. It seemed like Carter on the road to Damascus. I mean, he had all these plans about how one could deal cooperatively with the Soviets and all of a sudden this was thrown in his face.

NEITZKE: No, other than pulling together what was sent out as the initial cable guidance to the field, I wasn't involved. Of course, many people got called in to deal with various aspects of our response. And I was involved in how we handled the international diplomatic aspects of our boycott of the Moscow Olympics. I recall helping to draft memos, public remarks, press guidance, guidance to our embassies and so forth.

Q: I was recently talking to somebody who was in Moscow at the time, sitting in on a country team meeting, when our ambassador, Ambassador Watson, said, well, the Soviets have done this and now we have to figure out how to retaliate. And as they went around the table, one said we could boycott the Olympics and somebody else said we could cut off grain sales, we could cut out exchanges, etcetera, but then each person added that if we did that we would be hurting ourselves more than the Soviets. But still there was tremendous pressure to do something.

NEITZKE: Well, yes, retaliating against other governments usually isn't painless for us. But the idea is to inflict substantially more pain on the other party. The phenomenon you mention - everyone agreeing that something needs to be done to retaliate but no one wanting that retaliation to be at their own expense - is one I saw many times. I saw it repeatedly in our consideration of how to retaliate for this or that outrage by an East European government. No one wants the U.S. to retaliate by abolishing a program on which they themselves are working. No one wants to be cut out of the action. My favorite example is when an ambassador sends in his recommendations for Washington to show its displeasure with his host government and somehow fails to include the obvious option of withdrawing the ambassador himself. He doesn't want to leave. What this tendency can lead to on a larger scale, however, is that a bureau, an agency, or even the USG, comes to perceive itself as a vital player in a particular area when in fact we may be little more than a peripheral player at best. That's how I came to see a lot of U.S. policy toward Eastern Europe, especially near the end, in the mid-late 1980s. Our policy tended to vastly exaggerate our own importance in the region and, in the process, I believe, caused us fundamentally to misread where the real currents of change were coming from in the region. But we'll get to that later.

Q: Well then was there anything else about Policy Planning before you left?

NEITZKE: As I mentioned, the other thing of note in my second year there was doing a lot of the drafting for an effort directed by Under Secretary Newsom to counter the propaganda dimension of Soviet and Cuban proxy adventurism in the Third World. There were many aspects to this initiative, lots of drafting and coordinating. Our main objective was to make this an important part of our dialogue with everyone, foreign governments and international organizations, stressing the shambles that the Cuban economy was in after so many years of Soviet sponsorship and the critical role the Soviets played in the deployment of Cuban military forces to various trouble spots, mainly in Africa. The Cubans, of course, portrayed these deployments as a selfless, generous act by comradely Cuba, but it was in fact all orchestrated, financed, and made logistically possible by the Soviet Union. Now, after the Soviet Union's breakup and in the waning days of Castro, it's hard to imagine, but in those days the Cubans, working hand in glove with the Soviets, were a significant irritant and threat to U.S. interests in many parts of the globe. So that was the other main project I worked on.

Q: Well then in 1980 whither?

NEITZKE: I took a year off and studied Soviet and East European affairs at Johns Hopkins SAIS (School of Advanced International Studies) here in Washington.

Q: You were on leave without pay or-?

NEITZKE: No, it was under the Service's mid-career university studies program. It was one of two options I had been weighing.

Q: The other being?

NEITZKE: The other option - this might be of interest, I suspect few others have touched on one aspect of this, so let me add it - the other option was an offer to join an Under Secretary's staff. It was withdrawn unexpectedly and abruptly at the last minute when the Under Secretary's Executive Assistant, whom I'd gotten to know well and who was obviously embarrassed, told me they were "under pressure" to bring in a female Special Assistant, of which they then had none. And that...

Q: How did you react to that?

NEITZKE: Two reactions, I guess. First, I wasn't shocked. This sort of thing wasn't uncommon in those early, often awkward days of movement toward greater gender and racial equality in the Service. This one was at least handled with discretion. Sometimes the way these things were done was gross. I recall one of the regional bureaus around then advertising in the New York Times for a quote female, Asian-American, Deputy Assistant Secretary. I don't believe that had happened before. And I myself, in S/P, had once been instructed, at nearly all costs, to recruit a black officer for the front office, a task in which I found myself competing against other 7th floor recruiters similarly charged. It was demeaning for everyone involved, not least for the black officers whose names we'd been given, a couple of whom were obviously overqualified for and all of whom were uninterested in the jobs we had to offer. Later, when we get to my time in senior assignments in the late 1990s, I could tell you of other cases which suggest that we didn't actually make all that much progress in those twenty intervening years. The numbers went way up, of course, and a lot of very talented female and minority officers were given opportunities that their respective predecessors had been denied in a system that was at times blatantly discriminatory, but the manner in which the system handled these issues could be incredibly crude at times.

My other reaction was one of mild relief. After two years of the pace I'd kept up in S/P, I'm not sure how much I'd have been able to give to another 7th Floor staff job just then. And part of me wanted to get away, to try to stretch my mind to other things. In any event, that's how I spent '80 to '81, back in school.

Q: Did you get any real feel for the academic world? At the same time, SAIS is not just an academic institution it is part of the shadow government. There is this whole apparatus here in Washington, you have all sorts of wheels within wheels between the government and academic world.

NEITZKE: You're right about the shadow government, or governments, in Washington, especially in the think tanks, of which SAIS is one, in addition to being a grad school. Washington is thick with policy wonk has-beens and wannabes, crawling over one another, hoping that the party with which they're affiliated - and they're all affiliated, even those who pretend not to be - will make it into power and offer them a job. Often these are the folks who chose the academic route to foreign policy influence, as opposed to, say, the Foreign Service career route or working on the Hill. And collectively, the wonks in waiting make an important contribution to the foreign policy process, to coming up with new ideas, keeping Administrations on their toes, and helping Congress perform its oversight function. Many of them never actually make it into government. And the more academic of those who do make it into government - I saw this many times - tended to grow quickly disillusioned by, if not petty bureaucratic restraints, the many budgetary, political, or other limitations on practical policy options.

My sense from the SAIS experience is that professors in Washington are far less prone to airy theorizing, or crass indoctrination of their students, than professors in ivory towers more distant from the capital. Not only are some of these professors on loan from the government, teaching a course or two as a sidelight, but some of their students are also, as I was, government officials taking a temporary academic break. What I liked about SAIS is that it was both academic and hardheaded, real issues, real case studies, and so forth. Even those who were not headed to or coming from government fit this mold. In Soviet studies, for example, I had Dimitri Simes, one of our foremost academic Soviet experts at the time. An extremely insightful guy.

Q: So then in '81?

NEITZKE: I reentered the fray. I had wanted to be country officer for Yugoslavia, but it was technically a stretch and there were strong bidders at grade. So, I instead became country officer for Czechoslovakia and Albania. Again, a fluke of timing. It was one of the most intense and interesting jobs I ever had, mainly because of a series of negotiations I got involved in. The most important was on the issue of Czech Claims/Gold.

Q: Well, let us start with that.

NEITZKE: In June, when I returned to the Department, we were at a make or break point in negotiations with the Czechs over our demand for the payment of claims owed to U.S. citizens for property the Czech communist government began confiscating in 1948. The Czechs were demanding the return of their share of the Nazi-looted gold recovered by Allied forces at the war's end. Among older East European hands, Czech Claims/Gold was almost legendary. It was thought by many to be unsolvable, for a number of reasons, some having to do with the hold that a few angry Czech-American claimants had on key Congressmen and Senators. Yet it wouldn't go away and had bedeviled generations of Czech desk officers, Ambassadors to Prague, and others in East European Affairs.

Q: Why don't you give a little background. Who had this gold?

NEITZKE: The Nazis had looted gold from every nation they conquered and occupied. I'm talking here about gold looted from the treasuries of victim governments, not the gold looted from individual victims of Nazi persecution, although there may have been a small bit of intermingling. At the end of the war the victorious Allied armies rounded up as much of this gold as they could find, inventoried it, and stored it for safekeeping in their national repositories. The Allied governments then set up in Brussels a group called the Tripartite Gold Commission, tripartite because its members were the U.S., Britain, and France. The job of the TGC was to review claims by Nazi victim governments for gold losses, establish which governments were entitled to how much of the recovered gold, and return the bulk of that gold to them, keeping a small amount in reserve until the TGC itself made final apportionments and went out of business. The amount of gold retrieved and placed under TGC control was only about two-thirds of the amount that the various victim governments claimed to have lost.

By 1981, the only victim governments that had not received the bulk of their apportionment of the recovered gold were Czechoslovakia and Albania, and all of the remaining gold was stored in the New York Federal Reserve Bank and the Bank of England in London. Washington and London had blocked TGC gold distributions to both governments until U.S. and British citizens received compensation for property claims. There were other issues to be resolved in any deal with Tirana, but with the Czechs the problem was unresolved claims.

By the early 1960s the U.S. Foreign Claims Settlement Commission had established exactly who was entitled to how much compensation from the Czech government. The total figure was over $110 million, which I think was $60-some million in principal plus accrued interest. At least two earlier tentative agreements with the Czechs on claims/gold, one in the 1960s and one in the early 1970s, had been informally rejected by the Congress. In the meantime, the TGC in Brussels had grown moribund, staffed only by an elderly, likeable but somewhat eccentric retired British civil servant.

In the mid-1970s lawyers for some of the aging Czech-American claimants began building the case for the USG to seize the so-called "Czech gold" in the New York Fed, sell it, and use the proceeds to resolve claims. This effort had little traction at first but gradually gained a few key backers in Congress. Meanwhile the unresolved claims/gold issue was a year-in, year-out staple of our dialogue with Prague. Partly because of Czech resistance to paying the whole claim - we had settled with other countries for cents on the dollar - and partly because we couldn't tell the Czechs, after backing away from the other two tentative agreements, exactly what figure would satisfy Congress and the claimants, we made no progress in resolving the issue.

Two elements of the situation changed dramatically between late 1979 and early 1981. The price of gold skyrocketed, making the "Czech gold" in the New York Fed much more attractive to Prague, and, partly for the same reason, the claimants and their by then more formidable and aggressive group of high-end Washington lawyers persuaded the Congress to act. The lawyers too had their eye on the money; their fees would now be huge. The attorneys prevailed on an influential group of Senators and Congressmen to introduce legislation to seize and sell the "Czech gold" in the Fed and, from the proceeds, make direct restitution to the American claimants. The Administration, while sympathetic to the claimants, strongly opposed seizure of the gold as a gross violation of our treaty obligations. The TGC gold in the New York Fed was not legally "Czech gold;" it was held there jointly by the U.S., British, and French governments.

Q: But now this was at a time, early in the Reagan Administration, when Poland was starting to erupt, was it not?

NEITZKE: Yes. The climate for any kind of deal with an East European regime was rapidly chilling. In Poland the Solidarnosc movement was in full swing, pushing hard against the limits of Soviet tolerance. By the end of 1981 martial law had been imposed in Poland. The hard-line Czech regime had long been among our least favorite in the area. The political atmosphere there had grown uglier in the period since Prague Spring. Yet, under pressure from the American claimants, their attorneys, and a threatening Congress, the new Administration had to try to reach a claims/gold deal with Prague, and quickly.

Q: The odds were against you.

NEITZKE: The Congress had imposed a deadline for reaching a deal. The claimants' attorneys and Congress were demanding a claims settlement which, on a percentage basis, would have been incomparably higher than claims settlements the U.S. had reached with any other communist government. To be forced to pay such a settlement under threat of U.S. seizure and sale of what it considered part of its national patrimony was acutely embarrassing to the Czechs. Moreover, even if we and the Czechs came to terms, unless the Brits and the Czechs reached a similar timely deal, we couldn't officially release the gold and the Congress would act unilaterally. And the French, who held no gold, had no unsettled claims, and thought the whole enterprise pretty tawdry, threatened to stand on principle and withhold their consent to the release of the gold if our consent were tied to the payment of claims. And there was the problem of the mechanism for executing such a deal, requiring a simultaneous transfer of claims payments to the U.S. and UK Governments and physical transfer of the gold to Czech authorities.

When I arrived in June 1981, the negotiating effort, headed by Roz Ridgway, was at wit's end. My predecessor handed me a draft memo premised on the likely failure of the effort, looking toward what would have to be done to clean things up after the mess that would result from Congress' ordering seizure and sale of the New York gold.

Q: I take it you didn't fail despite all?

NEITZKE: At the last minute the Czechs budged. Not a great deal, but enough to give us something to work with. And before long they came across with a claims settlement offer we could accept. Then a whole new set of negotiations began. And for the next several months I often lived out of a suitcase, traveling with a small team from the Legal Advisor's office, Treasury, and Ambassador Ridgway on occasion to various combinations of Prague, Brussels, London, Paris, and Zurich. Zurich because that was where the Swiss Bank Corporation, our chosen agent for executing the deal, was located. The aim of these negotiations was to resolve the particulars of the bilateral claims settlement, finalize the simultaneous claims and gold transfer mechanism and nudge the Brits and Czechs to come to terms on their own bilateral problems before time ran out.

Q: Any impressions of Prague from your trips there?

NEITZKE: A strikingly beautiful old city. But the security atmosphere was almost surreal. In Prague's main square, there were huge banners everywhere, interpreted for me as reading, in essence, "with our Soviet brothers forever - and don't even think it could be different." That obviously reflected the regime's and Moscow's nervousness over what was going on in Poland. From my work on the desk I knew that Czech security types watched American officials closely, sometimes harassingly. But in our team's dealings with Czech officials, over long days of negotiation, there was a surprising degree of pragmatism, a seemingly genuine effort to see whether this problem couldn't be resolved despite the odds. Given all that was going on around us, it seemed at times as though we were in a protective bubble, free to try to work this out but knowing that at any moment, for any of a dozen reasons largely extraneous to our negotiations, the bubble could break.

In any event, since neither we nor the Brits trusted Prague, nor they us, the deal would have to be airtight. And the claimants' attorneys would need constant reassurance that nothing would go wrong. An additional obstacle, the one which in many ways entailed the greatest risk, relates to the fact that large amounts of gold are almost never physically transferred, let alone flown over vast oceans from one country to another. When it's transferred between governments, or central banks, gold is usually just moved from one pen to another in a central bank holding facility. But the Czechs were not about to trust us to hold onto it for them; it would have to be moved physically from New York and London to Zurich and held there under SBC auspices in the narrowest possible time window, until the simultaneous gold and claims payment transfers took place. Which presented other problems, since once the gold arrived in Zurich, in limbo in a sense, there was a risk that anyone of any nationality with any claim against the Czechs could ask a Swiss court to seize it pending resolution. The Czechs too would have to preposition the monies to be paid the U.S. and UK through the SBC.

So everything would have to be done quickly, with precise timing, and in utmost secrecy. Near the end, a couple of the key players got cold feet, fearing lawsuits in the event anything went wrong, and had to be indemnified against risk. And the lawyers and their claimants grew extremely skittish about any arrangement that would have the gold leaving physical U.S. control before we had the claims settlement.

Yet, one month after martial law was imposed in Poland, when almost nothing else positive was going on with Prague or the rest of Eastern Europe, we pulled it off. We finalized our claims settlement; the Czechs would pay a record 100 percent of principal plus some interest. We got the claimants' lawyers and congressional staff to back off and give us a bit more time. We finalized an extremely complicated settlement mechanism that was satisfactory, though just barely, to everyone. In a sometimes subtle, sometimes heavy-handed way, we prodded the Brits and Czechs, though mainly the Czechs, to come to terms with one another so that our deal could go through. We convinced the French to hold their noses, abandon principle, at least briefly, and let this happen. And then, assembled in Zurich awaiting the final go ahead, we held our breath as a huge amount of gold was quietly moved out of the New York Fed to JFK Airport, and out of the Bank of England, to planes bound for Zurich. When the planes landed in Zurich on the date of the deal, a Saturday, if I recall, to lessen the chances of a successful legal attachment, the gold was briefly off loaded to a warehouse where some in our delegation were allowed to examine it and, from what I later heard, went just a little crazy. But, as I said, it happened. The Czechs did not balk; they had prepositioned the money, for us and the Brits, as agreed. Working through the SBC, the codeword was passed and the deal was done. The Czechs hurriedly loaded the gold onto their own plane and took off.

Q: I suppose the lawyers were happy, too?

NEITZKE: More like ecstatic. They made massive fees. As difficult as the Czechs could be, the claimants' big-name lawyers were my least favorite players in all of this. From my first dealings with them it was clear that they regarded nearly everyone at State, with the notable exception of Ridgway, with something bordering on contempt, as though we were incompetently standing between them and, well, literally, a pot of gold. This was my introduction to a corner of Washington that few in the bureaucracy, at least at lower and mid-levels, come in contact with, the world of the arrogant, pushy, wildly-overcompensated Washington lawyer-lobbyists. Nice bunch of guys. And, by the way, not a word of recognition from any of them, again except for Ridgway, when we did, in fact, pull off the nearly impossible and in the process vastly enrich them. Most of the American claimants were pleased with the settlement, if not in absolute terms, at least compared to what they might have received under other circumstances.

For their part, the Czechs soon put some of the gold on public display, trying to portray the deal as regime-legitimizing move by two Western governments, which it wasn't, and as belated restitution for a great injustice done to the Czech and Slovak peoples, which, in part, it was. Johanes, their hard-line Ambassador in Washington, became Deputy Foreign Minister; Roz Ridgway's negotiating counterpart, Zantovsky, went on to become Czech Ambassador in Washington, and the other Czechs involved reportedly also fared well.

Q: Describe a little more what you personally did. I mean, were you just sort of coordinating, or...

NEITZKE: A lot of people contributed a lot of different talents. After Ridgway had elicited from the Czechs the acceptable gross settlement offer, it fell to me to become the day-to-day organizer and clearing house for most aspects of the months long negotiations that followed, pulling in Ridgway when needed, putting together various negotiating teams for various trips, making suggestions to resolve substantive problems during the talks, fielding hundreds of calls from anxious claimants, meeting with attorneys and Congressional staff, trying to convince them to trust us to pull this off, keeping the Brits and the French and the TGC head apprised of what we were doing, and devising ways, including a pretty strong demarche to the Brits and the Czechs, aimed at pushing them toward agreement. In the end, when we were all a little bleary-eyed, I helped check and recheck all the documents to ensure they were as agreed. In between, there was a steady stream of memos to my own front office - preoccupied with Poland and frankly very doubtful we'd actually succeed - and to Assistant Secretary Eagleburger and others.

Q: There must have been a certain amount of apprehension when the airplanes took off.

NEITZKE: As I said, this is not done, moving gold in this manner. What happens if a plane goes down with the gold? I don't recall whether it was insurable, but its loss would have queered the deal, since the Czechs wanted the gold. Or what happens if an international criminal group gets wind of the fact that there will be nearly a quarter of a billion dollars worth of gold bullion sitting in a lightly guarded airport warehouse in Zurich for a few hours - the entire deal, I believe, was in the range of $300-$400 million. And this was 1982. Or, what if any of thousands of people with claims against the Czech Government got to a Swiss court and managed to have the gold attached indefinitely. The odds were not with us, but as the process went on, our superiors in the Department and the NSC kept giving us more and more rope, as it were, without, until the very end, expecting that this would actually happen, that we'd succeed.

Q: Why do you think the Czechs finally agreed to it?

NEITZKE: I think they calculated that the ignominy of having "their" gold seized and sold would have been more damaging to their image than was the embarrassment of being forced to pay us a huge claims settlement. And in pure dollars and cents, the Czechs got more than they gave. In the earlier political level discussions there had been soundings from the Czech side about the possibility of a claims/gold settlement leading to Most Favored Nation trading status for Prague. We told them that while anything was possible given the right circumstances down the road, we could offer no assurance of any sort regarding MFN in the context of claims/gold. Still, I think the Czechs held out some hope, at least initially, but as the security situation in Poland began to tighten in the latter months of 1981, no one in the USG was talking about MFN for the Czechs under any conceivable circumstances.

Q: Beyond the gold- this is a really tough government, very close to the Soviets.

NEITZKE: Despite the grim regional security situation, we still expected that in the wake of this deal we might be able to take some further practical steps with Prague. We were wrong. The bilateral atmosphere quickly turned nasty, partly as a consequence of rising East-West tensions over Poland. The Czechs stepped up their harassment of our personnel in Prague; a military attachï¿½ was beaten up, I recall, and drugs were planted on another officer to create a scene. And there were several high-level denunciations of President Reagan, complete with Nazi allusions. Our Ambassador in Prague at this time was Jack Matlock, who was more than capable of giving as good as he got in any ugly standoff with the Soviets, let alone the Czechs; but it was a very difficult period.

When things eventually calmed down a bit, we undertook another negotiation with Prague involving much lower stakes but something of the same dynamic as claims/gold. We'd been making Social Security payments to recipients living in Czechoslovakia, while Czech authorities had long refused to make somewhat similar payments to former Czechs living in the U.S. We demanded reciprocity and threatened to begin withholding Social Security payments unless the Czechs started paying. There wasn't a lot of money involved, but it was hard currency, and the Czechs could do the math and knew that even with an agreement they'd still be taking in more than they paid out. But even a negotiation as seemingly simple as this took a while to crank up, get SSA and others on board, and work out details over talks in Prague and Washington. So, more travel. But we managed to pull this one off too. We got the Czechs to start paying American citizens and permanent residents who had a claim on the Czech social security system.

Q: And the third negotiation you mentioned?

NEITZKE: That was of a different sort. When the Nazis decimated the thriving Jewish community in Czechoslovakia, sending countless Jews to their deaths in the "show camp" of Theresienstadt or beyond, they meticulously inventoried and warehoused all manner of religious and other objects that they'd stolen from Jews. After the war, these objects were supposedly returned to the vastly reduced Jewish community in Prague but in fact were under the control of the Czech Government. Many were quite valuable. A private group in the U.S., coordinated by a well-connected senior Congressional aide named Mark Talisman, working with the Smithsonian Institution, was trying to bring to the U.S. a collection of these objects for exhibition under the name Project Judaica. Mark called on me frequently for advice and backstopping of various sorts in what was a long, frustrating, on-again-off-again negotiation with the Czech Government. In this case the Czechs stood only to gain good will by releasing the objects and letting the exhibition go forward. The downside for them was the risk that some of the objects would be seized in the U.S., either by persons with unresolved claims against Prague or by Jewish survivors from whose families they had been looted. This was still a tense period; the Czechs had little incentive to be accommodating. But in the end, after Mark had come near to pulling the plug on the project several times, and every legal assurance had been given the Czech Government, they relented. The Precious Legacy, as the exhibition was called, opened at the Smithsonian in January 1984. A very interesting show, superbly presented. Nearly a decade before the Holocaust Memorial Museum would open in Washington.

Q: How effective did you find the Czech embassy at that time?

NEITZKE: I got to know their Ambassador, Johanes, the DCM, Svec, and the Political Counselor, Jakubik, pretty well. And I got a good feel for what it would be like to work in a small, closely-Soviet-allied Washington Embassy in a period of East - West tension. The tenseness, the rigidity, and the fear in the place were almost palpable. No rewards for boldness, let alone risk-taking, and severe penalties for screwing anything up. I assume that the Embassy provided Prague its best counsel on how to deal with us, but I doubt that they ever went out on a limb, or advocated any position that they weren't certain would find favor in Prague. On claims/gold, my sense was that Johanes, a hard liner, was skeptical of the whole enterprise, doubting that everyone on the U.S. side was proceeding in good faith and suspecting that even if a deal were reached we'd find some way to snooker them. On the other hand, all the Czech diplomats were unfailingly polite, while formal. They weren't going to divulge much of anything; they were going to stick to the script. So exchanges tended to be sterile. In a way, it was sad to see people at that stage in their adult professional lives, bright, highly educated people having to tow a god awful line so closely and in such fear of overstepping it. By the way, the DCM defected to the U.S. shortly after I left the desk.

Q: How about the Czechoslovak ï¿½migrï¿½ groups in the U.S. How was it dealing with them?

NEITZKE: The most memorable thing is the rivalry between the Czechoslovak-American groups that supported a united Czechoslovakia and certain Slovak-Americans who, in the guise of championing Wilsonian self-determination, advocated the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. The latter constantly, and incorrectly, claimed the State Department was discriminating against them. It's ironic, now that the Czechs and Slovaks have peacefully split into separate nations, that in the early 1980s there was little discernable agitation for separation within Czechoslovakia itself. Inside Czechoslovakia, most complaints of discrimination came not from Slovaks but from Czechs, who argued, correctly, that Slovaks held a disproportionately large number of senior government and Party positions. Of course, all of the ï¿½migrï¿½ groups were viscerally anti-communist. So on claims/gold, for example, although their members included many of the claimants against the regime in Prague, they had great qualms about any deal that would hand over gold looted from a democratic Czechoslovak Government to the communist thugs in Prague, as they saw it. All of this made our dealings with the Czechoslovak and Slovak-American groups touchy. They vied for our favor. We never pleased either completely.

Q: What about reports, if I remember correctly, that Middle Eastern terrorist organizations were being trained by the Czechs?

NEITZKE: I recall such reports, but this wasn't a big issue while I was on the desk. I don't recall that the Czechs at that time were all that big a third area nuisance to us. They were plenty ugly right on the spot, harassing our personnel, calling us Nazis, and so forth.

Q: How about our warm and friendly relations with Albania?

NEITZKE: As you know, we had no relations at all with Albania. The extent of my dealings on Albania at first was to monitor the FBIS, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, output on Albania to keep abreast of the official line on what was happening there. And we'd get a bit of news from Allies who had small missions there. There was also the fate of our Italian-occupied former mission in downtown Tirana and the annual stipend I believe we paid Rome for its upkeep. The Italians kept wanting to buy it from us, cheap, arguing it was terribly run down and all but useless. We didn't yield on that. And we monitored Albania's recurring strong negative reaction to our Navy's determined efforts to exercise our right of unimpeded navigation through waters that the Albanians claimed as their own. Fortunately, the Albanians, who looked to Beijing for support internationally, were at least as hostile to the Soviets as they were to us. Otherwise, if the Soviets, for example, had made progress toward acquiring naval or other base rights in Albania, we'd have had a serious problem to deal with.

I did turn more to Albania in my second year as Czech-Albania country officer, mainly because, after resolving Czech claims/gold, Albania was the only country left to receive its gold apportionment from the TGC. We decided that, since we'd cranked up this moribund institution, and everyone was current on the mechanics of executing a deal, we'd see how far we could get even in the absence of direct ties with Tirana.

Q: And how did that go?

NEITZKE: The Albanian gold problem had some of the same dimensions as the Czech case; there were unresolved claims of Albanian-Americans against the Albanian regime. But there were also different aspects, such as that nearly all of the TGC gold identified for Albania was in the Bank of England rather than the New York Fed. And in addition to unresolved property nationalization claims, the British also had unsettled claims against Tirana arising from the Corfu Channel Case. The first task was to establish a means of communicating with Tirana, and the French were reluctantly persuaded to play that role, in addition to their role as a TGC member. We traveled to Rome to get the Italians' insights on dealing with the Albanians. But it took a long time to get the ball rolling on this. Through the French, the Albanians ultimately agreed to indirect exploratory talks with us and the Brits in Paris, at the Quai d'Orsay. I participated in those talks, in late 1983, I believe, even though I had left the desk some months earlier.

This undertaking was tricky in one additional respect. The Albanians - this was still the Hoxha regime - were categorically against any form of normalization with the U.S. or Britain. Although we were also interested in exploring normalization, we had to assure them through the French that this effort was aimed solely at seeing whether we could come to terms on delivery of their share of the gold. The actual mechanism for the talks was strange; we and the Brits would sit in one room at the Quai, the Albanians in another, with the French shuttling between us and assuring the Albanians that they would not actually have to meet us. The arrangement had elements of farce, as the French seemed to enjoy pointing out.

There were also indications at the time that we might be closer than we'd earlier thought to a post-Hoxha transition in Albania. There were recurring waves of purges in the country, yet they opened up a direct ferry link with Italy as I recall. Again, our most immediate concern was that any such changes not afford the Soviets an opening. Moreover, we didn't want to see anything feed already potent Yugoslav fears of Albanian irredentism regarding Kosovo.

Q: Well, the Straits of Corfu, there had been a nasty little battle there.

NEITZKE: A battle? Perhaps. My recollection is that the Corfu Channel Case, which I had studied in college, involved mines laid in Albanian territorial waters that blew up a British warship exercising its right of innocent passage. The Albanians said they didn't put the mines there, and the International Court of Justice I think concluded that they had or at least that they were responsible for it. The ICJ issued a monetary judgment in favor of Britain, which the Albanians refused to pay. So the need to deal with that old issue complicated Britain's participation in the claims/gold talks. While the amount of gold was not massive, it was sufficient, given the highly inflated price of gold, to make a deal potentially worthwhile, in strictly financial terms, to a cash-starved Tirana. In the end we didn't do this deal on my watch, but it was done later along the lines of the framework that we had laid out.

Q: So in what- when did you leave that job?

NEITZKE: I left that job in the summer of '83. I went to work for Ed Derwinski, the Counselor of the Department. Ed had served 12 terms in the House as a Republican Representative from the Chicago suburbs. In 1982 he lost his seat due to redistricting. I'm not sure how he was picked for the position, but he was quite close to Vice President Bush, a friendship that I think had developed when they served together in Congress and a relationship, occasionally a back-channel relationship, that Ed kept very much alive during his years at State. In any event, Ed came over to State in 1983 to the Counselor's job. I interviewed with him and became one of his Special Assistants.

Q: What exactly does the Counselor do?

NEITZKE: Counselor of the Department, an Under Secretary-level job, is a strange one in some ways. You've no doubt heard the adage "never take a job without an in-box." Well, the Counselor's job is pretty much that; no in-box, no established portfolio of issues, personnel, or subordinate bureaus and offices for which you are responsible in the Department's pecking order, at least not then. As Counselor, you had no legally-established portfolio of issues; your work, all of your work, was whatever the Secretary, or in some cases a more senior Under Secretary, asked you to take on. And that was a bit of a problem in Ed's case, because he didn't know the Secretary that well and because by background and temperament - the Hill is so different from State - he did not fit easily into State's culture. And there were some unfortunate efforts by the bureaucracy at least initially to keep Ed at arms length from some of the issues in which he most wanted to become involved.

Q: The Secretary by this time, was this still Haig or...?

NEITZKE: It was Shultz. And he and Ed got along well enough, but there wasn't a close personal bond. And as Counselor, you would benefit immensely from having a close relationship with the Secretary, based on which the Secretary would feel comfortable calling on you frequently for advice of one sort or another, or assigning you projects that were either especially sensitive or fell across jurisdictional lines in the Department. But Ed did not have that kind of relationship with Shultz, so we occasionally had to use other means to fill our plates, as it were. And we became quite good at that.

Q: How? How do you grab hold of issues that are not yours?

NEITZKE: Well, perhaps not grab hold of them exactly, but make sure your voice is heard and try your hardest to steer them in the direction you favor. And for that, under those circumstances, you rely mainly on expertise and opportunity. First, you need to know when papers, such as Briefing or Decision Memos, are moving toward the Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, or the Under Secretaries on issues of special interest to you, issues on which you might have a view different from that of the Assistant Secretaries sending them up. If you're not in the natural paper chain for these memos, and C often was not, this could be difficult. You'd have to use your contacts throughout the building to find out what was moving and when. Then you could either ask S/S for the formal opportunity to weigh in before the Memos moved up the chain, or, failing that, get briefed informally by a contact on the gist of the memos and write recommendations for Ed to send directly to the relevant 7th Floor principals. And we did that a lot, in addition to preparing occasional memos that Ed would take directly to the Vice President. As for expertise, obviously you had to have something worth hearing to say on a given issue, based on your past familiarity with it, or there was no chance of your being taken seriously or being formally cut in on the issue in the future. So, as 7th Floor outsiders, in one respect, you'd have to be careful about when you weighed in and the defensibility of what you were arguing. And we were.

Q: Talk a little more about why there was this difficulty in fitting a man like Derwinski into the...what you called State's culture?

NEITZKE: Sure. I learned a lot from Ed about how things get done, or at least how they used to get done in Congress, how, in contrast to State, it's far more an oral process than a paper process. More camaraderie, more backslapping, more fun. Commitments given orally can be relied upon. Members respect and defer to other Members' expertise in given areas. Decision-making is more diffuse, but decisions get made and are not constantly bucked up the line to higher authority. And once decisions are made, people sometimes actually move on; they don't endlessly reclama. And most importantly, each Member runs his or her own shop, is sovereign in a sense, is responsible ultimately only to his or her own constituents, and does not need to keep endlessly looking up and down chains of authority to ensure his position. That may be a bit overstated and a bit dated, but I think that's about how Ed looked at it. And he missed it a lot. You could tell. Still, he brought a great deal to the State Department; there was a lot of potential for him to help in ways that State needed help. But I think he often felt rebuffed here.

Q: How do you mean?

NEITZKE: One forgets today with so many new faces in Congress, many of whom know very little about foreign affairs, many of whom have not traveled extensively or dealt with foreign leaders, some of whom have even bragged about not having a passport, that there was a time in Congress when you had people who traveled everywhere abroad, who knew most of the issues and many of the key personalities. There was a time when the press didn't instantly beat you up for joining a CODEL and expanding your horizons a little. Ed was one such person. He was the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee when he lost his seat. He was a potentially invaluable resource for understanding the Hill, for playing tough foreign policy issues on the Hill, for getting an honest hearing on the Hill by some up there, some quite powerful, who frankly did not like State very much. And on a different level Ed was a politically astute Republican, in a very conservative Administration, with personal ties to a lot of conservative opinion leaders who, as I came to know, did not like State or the Foreign Service at all. Ed was ready and willing to help out in all these spheres, and did to some extent, but was underutilized. So we went to work carving out areas where we'd be listened to, where we could not be easily dismissed, to supplement the projects that Ed was assigned by the Secretary and others.

By the way, this situation of a Counselor lacking close ties to the Secretary or his Deputy, and without a full in-box of issues to take over from the get-go, was not unique to Ed. I know one former Counselor, and there probably were others, who had very strained ties with the Secretary and Deputy and who was more or less adrift in the job. So it's an odd job and sometimes a difficult thing for the Department to get right, but we tried.

Q: This would have been from...

NEITZKE: 1983 to 1986.

Q: Well, what sort of issues did you get into?

NEITZKE: Many dealt with Eastern Europe. I mentioned that I continued working on the Albanian claims/gold exploratory talks after leaving the Czechoslovak-Albanian desk. There was a turnover of personnel in EEY and I was the repository of expertise on this arcane issue. So I made several trips to Europe to help out on that. But eventually we took that about as far as we could and long hiatuses would develop in which we wouldn't hear anything at all from the Albanians except the nastiness they'd hurl at us through their official spokesmen.

We also got involved in some humanitarian issues concerning Romania. These were the years when we went through an annual ritual of holding Most Favored Nation trade status renewal for Romania hostage to Ceausescu's releasing and allowing to emigrate whatever human rights advocates were of most interest to us. Ultimately, Ceausescu would yield on a few cases and we would support MFN renewal in Congress for another year.

Cynical as this game already was, however, Ceausescu would sometimes respond to demands by us or others that certain individuals be allowed to emigrate by flooding the market, as it were. Romanian authorities would call in large numbers of people seeking to emigrate and issue them passports valid only for emigration to the U.S. Issuing the passports would cost these people, many of whom were not qualified for U.S. immigration, their Romanian citizenship and property rights, leaving them in limbo and, often, squalor. There was also an active Third Country Processing program, whereby third country nationals were processed through Romania for immigration to the U.S., or often, if I recall, nominally to the U.S. but in fact to Israel.

Q: Mainly Jewish refugees.

NEITZKE: Yes. Ceausescu would periodically jerk our chain on all of these issues. Yet, hard as it might be to acknowledge this now, Ceausescu in those days had a certain utility to us. His image as a communist renegade was overblown. He was a thug domestically. But Romania did conduct a foreign and defense policy that was an occasional irritant to Moscow, so we sought to encourage that. The leverage we had was MFN renewal, since Romania ran a significant trade surplus with the U.S. and wanted the hard currency. By the mid-1980s, various members of Congress were threatening to halt MFN for Romania altogether over Ceausescu's emigration and other human rights abuses. And the always irascible Ceausescu would periodically spout off to the effect that we could go and stuff ourselves, that no one was going to push him around. This was, of course, just a few years before Ceausescu and his wife were so ignominiously executed by that impromptu military firing squad, which we all saw on TV. In any event, there was a need for someone on the 7th floor to ride herd on these issues, travel out and talk to Ceausescu periodically, and try to get as much out of him on human rights as we could. That job for a while fell to Derwinski. I recall traveling to Bucharest with Ed on one occasion and separately helping negotiate with the Foreign Ministry an arrangement to avoid placing even more people in immigration limbo.

Q: When you went to Bucharest what were your impressions of Ceausescu and his regime?

NEITZKE: I'm tempted to say that Ceausescu was a bit Tito-like. Not that they ran their respective countries in the same way; Ceausescu's Romania was incomparably more brutal. But both men lived so above the fray of humanity as to be nearly immune to, say, shame or embarrassment. They both surrounded themselves with sycophants and had major problems with errant family members. Beyond that, though, the comparison would end. By the mid 1980s, Ceausescu was close to being a certifiable nut-case, running his country into the ground. He was beginning to execute plans to transform much of central Bucharest to more resemble imperial Rome, tearing down historic areas with plans to replace them with grand avenues, promenades, plazas, and great architectural edifices to his personal glory. He was all but out of control. What one could negotiate with him, on emigration and human rights cases, on anything, was limited, barely enough to warrant, and some would say it didn't warrant, annually renewing MFN status for Romania. In any event, that was our Romania brief.

Another Eastern European issue I worked on was called Polish Church Aid to Private Agriculture.

Q: The Catholic Church, I presume?

NEITZKE: Yes. After the Polish Government cracked down on Solidarnosc in the early 1980s there followed years of tense standoff between the Government and Communist Party, on the one hand, and, on the other, Solidarnosc, the Catholic Church, emboldened partly by the influence of Pope John Paul II, and other backers of liberalization. The Party had never been able to crush or collectivize Poland's many private farmers, who remained very productive despite chronic shortages of basic agricultural inputs. The idea, which came originally from the German and Polish Catholic bishops, I believe, was to set up a fund which they would administer, to provide material assistance, basic implements, more fertilizer and so forth, to enhance the private farmers' productivity. Funding would come from Catholic Churches in the West, Western governments, the EU and others. The initiative would put the Polish government on the spot; it had little legitimacy in the eyes of the Polish people as it was, and even that would erode if it were seen to block a simple gesture - from the Catholic Church at that - aimed at improving the lot of the Polish people. This wasn't conceived as a big, frontal assault on Communist authority, but rather as a simple, hard to refuse initiative that if successful might lead to greater freedom for private enterprise in Poland.

Derwinski was asked to help push this along. Our aim was to be helpful to the Bishops' initiative but not appear dominant, given our own strained relations with the Polish authorities. Ed, of course, as proud a Polish-American as ever there were, was more than happy to take this on. I recall traveling to Germany for meetings with the German Bishops and Government officials in a small group headed by Jack Scanlan, whose assignment as Ambassador to Warsaw was then in protracted limbo - he eventually went to Belgrade instead. It didn't take much effort to get the Congress to appropriate $10 million, if I recall, of the initial $30 million or so that the Bishops were trying to assemble. And other money was forthcoming from Catholic churches and some governments, but then we hit a wall. The UK and others refused to consent to an EU contribution, the initiative stalled, the Polish Government began quietly to ridicule the Church for its inability to raise even the initial funding - some in the church had speculated that billions of dollars could eventually be raised. So I accompanied Ed to London to try to get the Brits off the dime, but with limited success despite I think a written plea from Reagan to Thatcher that Ed delivered.

I don't recall what, in the end, happened to this effort, whether it stalled altogether, got off to a modest start, or simply hobbled along until with the fall of the Wall it became moot.

Q: Well, you say you assisted Mr. Derwinski in this and that, and I can see something of what you did, but, really, what do all these 7th Floor Special Assistants, Executive Assistants, Staff Assistants, and others do all day?

NEITZKE: A lot of people wonder that; it seems like an awful lot of talent dedicated to paper flow, to simply moving papers produced at lower levels up to the decision makers. What they do varies from office to office. And the Counselor's Office was not typical, partly for the reasons I've mentioned, that we had so few established issues of our own when we started out. Generally, the 7th floor Executive Assistants in the main Under Secretary offices, P, E, and T, for instance, were the closest staff member to the principal, controlling people and paper flow, and some scheduling, and getting the final chop on memos moving to the Under Secretary for decision. If they had any Staff Assistants, more junior officers, these would generally work to keep the crush of paper into these offices, reporting cables, for example, manageable. The Special Assistants, and there might be up to five in each of the main Under Secretaries' offices, were the Under Secretaries' in-house issues experts, working with the bureaus to ensure timeliness and thoroughness of briefing and decision memos, suggesting areas that needed attention, and offering their own views on issues coming up for decision.

But, as I said, life in C, when Ed was Counselor, was a little different. In addition to working on issues assigned to Ed, or that I'd picked up on my own, such as Albania, we were free to suggest to Ed policy recommendations or critiques of Bureau recommendations that he could then send to the Secretary or Deputy Secretary, the Under Secretaries, or the Assistant Secretaries. Or Ed would tell us he wanted this or that kind of memo drafted for this purpose. And one of the issues on which we frequently intervened, kibitzed is probably more accurate, was U.S. policy toward Eastern Europe. This was an especially interesting area in the Reagan Administration because it became a flashpoint for policy disputes, especially in the years after the crackdown in Poland, between two groups: the many very conservative political appointees, especially at the White House, NSC staff, and Defense, who almost reflexively argued for the hardest line policy responses, and the career, mainly FSO, Eastern European hands at State, who argued almost as reflexively for moderate responses that would keep us in the game. At the 1980s progressed, in 1984-85 I think it was, EUR increasingly argued for a more proactive U.S. approach to the Eastern European regimes, in the belief that a fundamental, historical reorientation away from the Soviet Union was in the offing and that the U.S. could hasten this process and contribute to their liberalization.

The position we staked out, in several memos I drafted for Ed, none of which was welcomed much by my friends in EUR - and one of which brought me a private career warning from a senior official in EUR - took a different view. You recall the sequence of leadership changes in Moscow in this period; it did look as though the Soviets were having trouble holding their act together. We argued, however, that this did not signal a major turning point for Eastern Europe, that the U.S. should not take an indiscriminately more activist approach to these still hard line regimes, most of whose leaders were utterly beholden to Moscow. Some of these regimes were still, in various ways, fighting against Western interests in the Third World. And nearly all of them would use enhanced contacts with Washington to bolster their domestic standing, which was shaky. We wanted differentiation strengthened, not undermined and didn't think the time was ripe to do much of anything with, say, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, or Bulgaria. And this was a little dicey for me, because my old Belgrade boss, Mark Palmer, was the EUR DAS behind the activist initiative, and my old Czech claims/gold boss, Roz Ridgeway, became Ambassador to East Germany and was intent on exploring a deal with that regime potentially involving limited MFN status. So again, the positions that I was articulating in Ed's memos did not sit well with EUR.

This debate was sort of the first phase of a policy struggle that continued throughout the 1980s, until the Wall came down. And the essence of the debate was whether the U.S. could be a truly decisive player in Eastern Europe - even assuming, always doubtful, that we could sustain the focus, political will, and resources needed. The other question was whether, if and when liberalization came, it would more likely come through a softening and reorientation of the existing Eastern European communist regimes or, rather, through popular rejection and replacement of those regimes. This was a debate that I returned to in a lengthy cable I wrote from Embassy London in, I guess, 1987 or '88.

Q: Well, for now, any other issues you were involved in in Derwinski's office?

NEITZKE: One major one and a couple minor ones, each maybe interesting from a different perspective. First there was Cyprus, and it's worth mentioning perhaps because it illustrates how some policy disputes within the bureaucracy, fights ostensibly over substance, are at least as much fights over turf, fights between individuals each intent on controlling the issue. Rick Burt was EUR Assistant Secretary at the time, and he was determined that a deputy of his, Richard Haas, who I think now heads the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, would control this issue. But Ed, with long and deep ties to the Greek-American community, wanted badly to play a central role, especially, as Ed advocated, if the U.S. became more actively involved in trying to help broker a settlement on the island.

Compared with Eastern European policy, Cyprus constituted a role reversal for C and EUR. Here, EUR was hesitant for the U.S. to get out front of the UN, which was then carrying the ball for the international community in trying to get inter-communal negotiations restarted. EUR feared that a higher-profile U.S. effort could risk other equities with our two NATO allies on an issue that appeared to have no chance of going anywhere soon. Ed, in part reflecting great dissatisfaction in the Greek-American community with the absence of any significant Administration effort on Cyprus, argued we should give it a try and that he should be the one to do it; if necessary, he could sell an imperfect settlement to the Greek-Americans that others could not. The substantive clash, and the clash of personalities, became a bit nasty and a bit petty and for me consumed a lot of time. A suggestion that Ed and Haass work together on Cyprus went nowhere, since Ed, far more senior, would be controlling, hardly what Burt or Haass wanted. And EUR made clear its disdain for Ed's involvement. The sparring - through memos that I would write for Ed - went on for some time before the Secretary finally gave Ed the go-ahead to travel to the region. I accompanied him and...

Q: Denktash, wasn't he the leader of the Turkish Cypriots at that time?

NEITZKE: Yes. And I believe Kyprianou was the Greek Cypriot President then.

Q: These were two guys who had been playing this game for a long time.

NEITZKE: Indeed. You had the impression that the leaderships of both the north and the south, the Turkish Cypriots and the Greek Cypriots, and not just Denktash and Kyprianou - there were lots of others especially on the Greek side - were feeding off of this perpetual tension and publicity, and some of them would almost sooner die than seriously contemplate the compromises necessary to resolve it. On the ground, much of the dust had settled from the original division of the island; the refugees had fled and to some extent been resettled, the north was not heavily populated and the whole issue of Cyprus had become tied up in the larger Greek-Turkish antagonism. I recall at one briefing in particular by the Greek military in Athens being struck by the extent to which Greek military forces were aligned, not in any way that made sense vis-a-vis the Warsaw Pact but instead squarely against Turkey, their ostensible NATO ally.

Q: I spent four years in Greece in the '70s and the whole Turkish Third Army was positioned for a thrust up towards Istanbul. It was not going to happen but that was their thinking.

NEITZKE: And I recall the many speeches in Athens and Nicosia and toasts to the boundless glory of Hellenism, which struck me as a little at odds with recent Greek history, the clear thrust of all of which was to put down what they saw as the perfidious, culturally backward Turks. As though no Turk had ever done anything. All the glory lay on one side. Your adversary's position had no merit whatsoever. This was all fairly nauseating stuff even by the Eastern European standards to which I was more accustomed. We were spared having to sit through the Turkish equivalent of this onslaught - and everyone knew that Denktash could give as well as he got - by the news we received while in Nicosia that Ed's mother had died, at which point we broke off the trip and returned home. We had found no basis for believing that an early breakthrough - even with a stepped up U.S. role - was likely, and none was forthcoming, although Ed was able to hold onto the issue and did travel out again.

The other minor issue on which I worked, minor for us, or me, that is, certainly not minor in itself, was refugee affairs. I mention it only because it highlights how much time and energy on the 7th Floor goes into managing not just tough issues, but difficult personalities within the building. The Reagan Administration had a system of, I think they were called Senior Inter-Agency Groups, in any event SIGs was the acronym, to deal with major issues that cut across agency lines. Ed was State representative on the SIG that dealt with refugee matters. Since we had a competently run Bureau of Refugee Affairs, as well as an in-house but partially inter-agency Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, you might think that only a minimum of effort would have been necessary to keep things on track. Not so. The Coordinator at that time tended not to keep Ed in the loop or even to acknowledge Ed's role on the SIG. More worrisome was his proclivity for launching initiatives and making pronouncements without coordinating with anyone. He saw himself more as a Refugee Czar than Coordinator. Ed received very clear instructions from the Secretary to keep his eye on this guy.

Many of the problems in this area sprang from what was then going on in Central America. El Salvador is a case in point. The right-wing government, which we backed and were trying with limited success to reform, appeared allied with death squads whose activities were spawning a steady flow of Salvadorans into the U.S. Many claimed asylum and were denied but were allowed to stay here under a program called EVD - Extended Voluntary Departure, a program, or determination, which many Poles in the U.S. had also benefited from earlier in the decade after martial law was imposed in Poland. We don't promise them they can stay, but we don't send them back to a troubled homeland immediately; they're kind of in limbo. Meanwhile the Salvadoran Government was arresting and detaining large numbers of leftists, or people labeled as leftists. The Democrats controlling Congress, who strongly opposed Reagan's Central American policies - you remember the Contras too, I'm sure - were pressuring the Administration to allow Salvadorans on EVD to stay here indefinitely and to pressure the Salvadoran Government to release its prisoners and allow some of them too to come to the U.S. The whole issue was a loser for the Administration; it had to be finessed. Instead, our Coordinator, largely on his own, was running roughshod over other agency prerogatives, while fanning fears of a massive Central American refugee invasion of the southwestern United States if Congress continued to oppose the President's policies. There was even loose talk, and this was nearly 25 years ago, of the need to build a fence to seal our southern border. And none of this had been vetted by the White House. Ed's job, as I said, was to sit on this guy, or try to sit on this guy; it wasn't easy. My job was to staff Ed's attempt to do this, to find out what damage was about to be done next and get Ed to head it off. We had only variable success. And the Salvadorans were only one of many refugee issues.

But the issue I worked on in Derwinski's office that's most memorable involved Afghanistan. It also constituted my introduction to what are now called the Neo Cons...-

Q: Neo Conservatives

NEITZKE: Yes. I mentioned earlier that some pretty conservative political appointees were sprinkled throughout the bureaucracy. I'm not talking about the many mainline Republican appointees, who constituted the vast majority of politicos in the Reagan State Department. The people I'm referring to were more imperious, self-righteous, itching-for-a-fight, don't-trust any-of-the-careerists, fire-in-the-belly types. A group of them, mainly from Richard Pearle' s International Security Policy office at Defense, were focused on how to make things tougher for the Soviets in Afghanistan. This is 1983-84, before our surreptitious arming of the Afghan mujahideen began to turn the tide against Moscow.

It was known that the mujahideen, whom we were supporting through the Pakistanis, were holding a small number of Soviet soldiers, some captured in battle, some who had apparently deserted, fleeing the horrible life of a Soviet grunt in Afghanistan. The idea was to get the Pakistanis to get the mujahideen to release these Soviet soldiers, offer them the opportunity to defect to the West, defectors was the term we used, and, if they agreed, facilitate their movement to the U.S. where, with lots of TLC, they would embrace freedom and democracy, spill their guts about what all they knew of Soviet military strategy and tactics in Afghanistan, and become, in essence, spokesmen against the brutality of the Soviet invasion of that country. There was also a humanitarian angle to this effort, the concern that unless someone took these guys off the mujahideen's hands, they would probably be killed.

There were indications early on that this seemingly ingenious initiative might be fatally flawed, might even blow up in our face, that the kinds of poorly-educated, low-ranking, drug-abusing Soviet soldiers you were most likely to get would be of almost no intelligence value and were not likely to have the stability and maturity even to handle the emotional trauma of coming to the U.S., let alone to become usable public spokesmen against the Soviet military. We had larger fish to fry with the Pakistanis, and this kind of effort, even if we pulled it off in mechanical terms, could complicate that. A major concern was that we'd be accepting Soviet soldiers essentially unvetted, unvetted by us at least, and at that point they'd be ours for better or worse; there'd be no sending them back. And if and when you eventually began parading them around publicly in the West, these so-called defectors would quickly be subjected to Soviet threats and blandishments, pleading letters from their mothers that they come home, for example, along with Soviet assurances that there would be no retribution. The people in the U.S. Government who would have to handle this process on the ground already had their hands full and were not keen on it, to say the least; they knew even more of the potential pitfalls than we did. The whole thing would also put the Pakistanis in a difficult position, for many reasons, again even assuming we could do it right, and quietly. Then there was the issue of whether and how much we might have to pay the mujahideen to release these guys. So there was lots of cause for concern.

But, as I believe Eagleburger put it, by then Under Secretary for Political Affairs, in handing off oversight within State of this issue to Derwinski, this was like a freight train coming straight at us; we couldn't stop it; all we might reasonably hope to do was shunt it aside and limit the damage. To oppose it outright, given the prevailing mood in the Administration on Afghanistan at that time, was not on.

Derwinski made me his staffer on this, and I ended up doing a lot of the writing and clearing around and such, wrestling various issues to the ground, and it took a lot of time. It's not the sort of thing that FSOs typically get involved with. In the end I traveled out to Islamabad with Ambassador-At-Large Dick Walters - a story in itself - for talks with the Pakistani Foreign Minister, whom Walters knew well. And they agreed to let us give it a try. And that was the "shunting" that we had devised in the weeks leading up to that trip, a one-time trial run, incorporating every safeguard we could think of...

Q: Who do you mean? You say "we"...

NEITZKE: The group working this issue. It included two from the NSC Staff, a couple from Eagleburger's office, a couple from NEA, some from the Agency, and I guess there would have been Justice involvement as well. Pearle's people, although, having initiated the idea, were not all that involved in implementing it.

We did ultimately exfiltrate, that was the term, exfiltration of Soviet defectors, one small group, and...

Q: What were they like, I mean when they got here, or wherever?

NEITZKE: Although not quite as wasted as we'd feared, they were clearly not the exploitable PR trove that Pearle's shop had imagined. I'm not sure whether any of them ever appeared publicly, or spoke out, and, as I recall, a couple were incurably homesick from the get-go. I can't say for sure whether any ended up staying here.

Q: Well, what did happen to them?

NEITZKE: I'm not certain. I think a few did opt fairly soon to return home to mother and whatever fate awaited them. But for a while at least, they took a lot of care and feeding. The whole enterprise brought home to me and others involved who didn't do this sort of thing for a living the amount of effort that must go into cases of true Soviet defectors, educated persons consciously abandoning their homeland, betraying their homeland, leaving at least extended family behind. I don't know what happened to all of the guys we brought out, whether any of them in the end actually accepted the opportunity to stay here. Possibly a couple did. But there was no second exfiltration, no second group. And there was no massive anti-Soviet propaganda splash from this. But we did, as Eagleburger had charged us to do, we did shunt that train aside and we did minimize the damage.

Q: OK, let us finish up with Derwinski; they did not give him, I take it, much of a role in dealing with Congress. I mean, they the H Shop...-

NEITZKE: H, Congressional Relations, was understandably jealous of its prerogatives, and the Counselor, even an ex-twelve-term, ex-ranking HFAC member like Ed, could not be working the Hill day in and day out. Ed did consult with H from time to time, but the kind of advice that Ed would tend to give was not what H wanted to hear. Ed could tell you instantly the five main reasons why you'd never be able to sell this or that initiative to a particular member. That kind of advice would not be welcome in H, whose job it was to sell all kinds of things to the Hill that the Hill didn't want to buy. What ideally might have happened would have been for H and others in the Department, and possibly the White House, to tap into Ed's store of Hill political knowledge early on, to see whether he couldn't help think of some way to best package sales pitches to various members. But this rarely happened, and it's a shame. I remember going up with him to see Senator Grassley, to see Tom Lantos; I met many people through Ed and it was clear that he was welcomed as one of the boys when he went up to the Hill, and that his soul and spirit had never actually left the Hill.

Q: Well, anything left to cover in the Counselor's office?

NEITZKE: Two things, which should probably be part of this record, and neither of them was pleasant. The first was a tragedy, in every sense of the word. One afternoon, it was 1985 I think, when Ed and two staff members were away, traveling abroad, the deranged son of one of our secretaries came into the building through the minimal security that then existed at the main C Street entrance, dressed, I believe, in combat fatigue pants and a tee shirt, carrying a duffel bag, and flashing his family member pass to get in. No one searched him, or would have been required to under the procedures that were then in effect. He took an elevator to the 7th Floor and made his way to our suite of offices on the 7200 corridor. Our office was adjacent to the suite of the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Mike Armacost, whose office was in turn adjacent to the Secretary's suite. This young man, in his upper teens, or very early 20s, at one point, I'm not certain of the sequence, ducked his head into our outer office area where the secretaries' desks were, looking for his mother, who was momentarily out of the office. He apparently went to a lavatory on the 7200 corridor and there assembled the broken down .22 rifle he had in his duffel bag. Whether he immediately returned to our office or went looking for his mother in other 7th Floor hallways isn't clear; there were later reports that people had seen someone with a gun walking around. Presumably someone at that time had first called building security as well. I never did learn how or when they were alerted, but they didn't appear on the scene until everything was over. In any event, he returned to our office and, finding his mother at her desk next to the door, shot her repeatedly at pointblank range and killed her.

I was sitting in my office when this was happening, about 10 feet from where it was happening, but it was an inner office with a fairly heavy wall separating me from the outer office. My door was open, but all I heard, no shouting, no argument, no talk at all, was the faint poof, poof of the shots, fired, as I said, at pointblank, which I didn't take to be gun shots. So there was very little sound. What I did hear was a sound that I'd never heard before and have never heard since from a human being, a sort of stifled shriek from one of the secretaries who had witnessed the whole thing and fled, along with other staff, into Ed's inner office and locked the doors. I came out of my office and saw only one person in our outer office, the young man, standing bloodied and somewhat bent over by his mother's desk. I didn't see his mother's body just then, which was on the floor behind her desk. We made eye contact briefly. The rifle was still in his hands but he didn't aim it at me. What it later dawned on me was happening at that moment is that he was turning it on himself, and he did in fact kill himself.

I have pretty decent reflexes, always did, and I turned and was out of there quickly, moving down the inner corridor to the Under Secretary's office, alerting other staff members to flee. It wasn't clear at that point that the young man was no longer a danger. When I ducked out through another door into the 7200 corridor, there were still no security officers around, but there was no one else in that long hallway either; I later learned that many offices had gone basically into lockdown when the rumors of a gunman roaming the halls had first spread. I then saw someone emerge into the corridor from our own outer office. It was our staff assistant, who had eventually come out of Ed's inner office and removed the gun from the young man who was by then dying or dead on the floor. He walked the rifle out into the corridor and set it down. I thank God that the security officers, who arrived with guns ready when they finally did arrive, did not come upon the scene at that instant, or there might well have been another casualty. I briefly returned to our outer office. By then emergency people were being called. I went to Armacost's office, asked if I could interrupt his meeting and told him what had happened. He immediately went off to brief the Secretary.

It was all over the evening news, including the national newscasts. I just thought I should add this because it was something I witnessed and there are probably only a couple other people who could ever tell you that story. And this tragedy marked a major turning point in State Department security. Inadequate doesn't even begin to describe the situation up to that day, but...

Q: I remember it. The security was terrible. I remember a case in which I had issued a non-immigrant visa to a Yugoslav who was part of Serbian chorus and had assured me he was going to come back. Well, of course, he stepped off the plane and claimed political asylum here. And then I came back to Washington and he called me up and said can I see you? I said okay, I will meet you down at the C Street entrance, and he said that's ok I can just meet you in the corridor. Here is an unaccompanied illegal alien from a communist country who just came waltzing up to see me in the middle of the State Department. Did you ever figure out whether the young man in your case had been violent before?

NEITZKE: That was part of the tragedy. Unbeknownst to us, he had apparently been threatening his mother for some time, had a drug problem and I believe a history of mental problems as well. She had become so fearful, in fact, that she had sought to have the family member State Department security pass she'd gotten for him withdrawn. It wasn't. I'm not even sure his name was ever placed on a watch list for the C Street security guards. That pass was why he hadn't had to go through a metal detector when entering the building.

Q; Well just as a practical measure, I mean, how did you in that office manage a tragedy like this? Today we have counselors, you know, who come in, grief counselors, but it must have been hard to put the office back together again.

NEITZKE: MED was quickly informed, and I think they did send up counselors. I'm not sure. I called Ed, who I think was in Seoul at the time, and he immediately returned home. Of course the bodies were quickly removed and over the following few days, which some of the staff took off, the office was cleaned up and all evidence of what had happened removed. We all attended the funeral. The family seemed genuinely moved that we had come. I don't know. You just move on and over time the trauma of something like that recedes. It did for me, in any event, and I'm not aware that any of the others suffered lasting effects, other than the memory, of course. Today, when these types of events happen with some regularity in places, schools for example, that we'd all thought immune to this kind of danger, one forgets how utterly shocking this was at the time. It was surreal.

Q: I was thinking this is probably a good place to stop.

NEITZKE: Well, if you have time, there's one more item to record from my years with Derwinski; then we could start fresh with my assignment to London next time.

Q: OK. Go ahead. By all means.

NEITZKE: You recall my earlier criticizing Larry Silberman for the manner in which he spoke out against the Foreign Service after leaving Belgrade, about how FSOs should essentially be banned from policy-making positions in the Department?

Q: Yes.

NEITZKE: Ed gave a long interview to the Washington Times from which they published excerpts in a couple articles. In the first they had Ed, focusing on Congressional opposition to the president's Central America policies, lashing out at anonymous posturing congressmen, basically at all Congressional opponents of the President's policy. What Ed said on this subject was well-founded and rang true. It's just that the language they quoted him as using, at length, was not what you'd ever expect to hear from an Under Secretary of State, certainly not one speaking on the record. And that may have been the problem, a misunderstanding about what was to have been background and not on the record. But from my standpoint, the second article was much more troubling. What he was quoted as saying was basically that the State Department was a managerial mess, that H was incompetent, and that much of this stemmed from FSOs who were not politically loyal to the President having too much authority, getting too many ambassadorships, and having little or no touch for dealing with Capitol Hill. He even went on to sort of damn Secretary Shultz with faint praise, you know, a very bright and skilled guy who, for all of his efforts, faced insuperable odds in trying to run the show effectively.

Q: Isn't that the sort of thing that might get somebody in trouble, fired even?

NEITZKE: That was among the first questions reporters asked at the Department's noon press briefing that day. By which time, we had prepared guidance - cleared with Ed who was out of town when this broke - indicating, as I recall, that Ed had been misinterpreted. But since the Times had used extensive quotes of Ed's remarks and stood by its reporting, the spokesman's use of that guidance was like throwing red meat to the rottweilers. They had a field day. It went on and on. And Shultz, with whom, as I said, Ed did not have particularly close personal ties, was not amused. Ed sent - actually I drafted it and then discussed it with Ed - a fairly abject personal apology to the Secretary, but arguing that he'd been misquoted, had actually been trying to help the Administration, and so forth. What could you say? Anyway, Ed did not lose his job. As I mentioned, he knew the Vice President very well, and I suspect some in the White House, and many in Republican foreign policy circles outside of government, loved and agreed with every word of it. Ed, of course, eventually went from C to T, Under Secretary for Security Assistance. And then when Bush, the elder, became President, he named Ed Secretary for Veterans Affairs, a member of the Cabinet.

Q: But, I mean, you, how did you feel about this?

NEITZKE: Poorly. I didn't take it personally, at least in that I knew Ed's blast hadn't been directed at me, more likely at a couple of senior FSOs near the Secretary who had initially treated him in an arrogant, almost dismissive fashion, trying to shut him out, limit his access to cables, and so forth. But I'd worked hard in that job, racking up a decent record of accomplishments on various issues that had helped make our office, at least occasionally, a voice to be reckoned with, and now this. I hadn't seen this side of Ed before. In fact, when he had occasionally received groups of ultra-conservative pundits and think tankers in his office - he was about the only one in the building they felt comfortable with - Ed's had usually been the voice of moderation, at least comparatively. So this was a surprise. And out of loyalty to Ed I had turned down an earlier offer to move down the hall and work for Eagleburger. But I'd married an FSO, Jean Christoff, in January 1985 and we were still in the very difficult hunt for good tandem assignments overseas, so when all this broke I wasn't really in a position to do anything precipitous. And in time this too passed.

Q: OK, we'll stop here.

Let's pick it up from where we left off. You left the Counselor's Office in, what was it?

NEITZKE: 1986. We had landed tandem assignment in London.

Q: Well, that's just about impossible to do, is it not, I mean at mid-career, getting not one but two jobs in London?

NEITZKE: Yes. It was, nearly impossible. And a byzantine process. Getting Paris, Rome, Bonn and a few other posts, when you're at the 0-2 or 0-1 level, I'm sure was also tough, but I think at that time - it may have changed now - London was almost in a class by itself. People wanted to go there for a lot of reasons. And some who made it were frustrated; it wasn't what they'd expected, especially those who'd served mainly in the developing world and gotten used to having household help and working in a tight-knit Embassy community. Help, and living in general, was extremely expensive in London, and the Embassy was so large, hundreds of people representing some 25 U.S. Government agencies, that some I'm sure felt like mere cogs in a machine. Nonetheless, it was highly sought after. A colleague in the Department once told me, a guy who had just been paneled to be Political Counselor in London, that he'd been approached in his office at State by a grown man in tears, an FSO, pleading with him to withdraw from the job so that he could try to go in his place. I don't know whether that guy's marriage was on the line, or what, if he didn't get London, but there was definitely an allure to the place.

Getting to London at the level at which I was competing meant first getting the support of the post and then of the bureau, EUR. The Personnel system generally yielded to the post and the bureau on these jobs, assuming that their candidate was legitimate, not fair share, not a stretch or anything. I knew the Political Counselor and interviewed with the Ambassador and, with their support, was eventually paneled to the job, and my wife was paneled to a job in ECON. But after some time, weeks I think, I was informed that the Deputy Director of Personnel had summarily de-paneled us from London and assigned us to Guatemala. Other than the fact that there wasn't a real job for my wife in Guatemala, Guatemala would have been fine; in fact we'd been trying hard for two assignments cycles to get just such a post. I had briefly been the lead candidate for political counselor San Salvador, until ARA decided they weren't going to let an EUR hand have that job and bumped me for one of their own guys. Which was okay, that's how the game's played.

What I learned in that rough two-year tandem assignment hunt is that as you proceed with your career, despite what your overall reputation might be, if you hadn't earlier served in a particular region of the world, it could be very difficult for you later on to land, say, a Political Counselor of DCM job there. Which is understandable; you were going to be competing against officers who already had language and area experience and may have even served in that particular post before and who were well known to the relevant bureau. But that same prejudice didn't as often hold for Europe; there was a widespread sense, especially among officers who hadn't served in Europe, that anyone could perform equally well in Europe, no special expertise was needed, no special advantage should accrue to anyone who had served there. In fact, many felt, and the system reinforced this to some extent, that those who had already served in Europe should get out of the way and let others have a chance.

But Personnel's Guatemala move for us was clearly a makeshift assignment to get me out of the London job, which had been engineered by ARA trying to get one of their guys to London. So we said enough is enough. My wife was then seven months pregnant, had already lined up her doctor and hospital in London, and we fought this and won, thanks to a timely intervention by Derwinski. But it's difficult...

Q: It sounds like you were de-paneled because there was somebody else with clout who was trying to get the London job.

NEITZKE: London was a peculiar case. Paris too may have worked this way. Since the Brits conducted a true global foreign policy, had lots to share with us on all regions of the world, and because of the experts on every region of the world available in the global expat community in London, several of the jobs in the Political Section had typically been filled in consultation with the respective regional bureaus. For example, NEA would sign off on whoever was going there and would handle "their" issues in London, AF the same, to a lesser extent ARA, and EAP not so much. The job I'd been paneled to did handle ARA issues, most importantly, the simmering aftermath of the 1982 Falklands War, so ARA wasn't completely out of line. But the way they went about it, Elliot Abrams himself, ARA Assistant Secretary, I believe, was dirty pool. And we prevailed on the Director General, George Vest, I think, to overrule his deputy, and he did. And in light of what later transpired on my watch in London, which I'll get to in a bit, I'm sure ARA doubly regretted losing that fight.

Q: Can you describe the Political Section when you got there, how large and all?

NEITZKE: There were about 10 officers, not all State Political Officers, a couple military, and others. Except for the Counselor, most of the State officers were at the 0-2 or 0-1 level. All pretty hard chargers, strong backgrounds, and with full plates of issues to work. It's heresy today, as we transfer positions from our bloated embassies in Western Europe to meet the challenges of Transformational Diplomacy in the Middle East and elsewhere, to say that we were not overstaffed when I was in London, but it didn't feel as though we were at the time. People worked long days, usually not by choice. Part of the problem was the incredible number of high-level official visitors that London gets, from State, the White House, other agencies, and the Congress, most of whom needed some care and feeding, escorting and note-taking, which could be time-consuming. The Cold War was still very much alive, the Brits were our closest ally, there was an unusually strong personal bond between Reagan and Thatcher, and we had important military bases in Britain and intimate military to military ties, as well as a vast intelligence relationship, dwarfing what we had with anyone else. And there was an almost inexhaustible supply of experts in London on every corner of the former empire. So a lot of people put a stop in London on their itinerary. But the main reason several of us were so busy during my first year there was the British election of 1987, which I guess we'll come to.

Within the section, most of the five or six of us core political reporting officers covered both a region of the world, and one or more domestic political parties. So you had both an external and an internal beat. One officer might cover the Conservative Party and EU and other European issues, for example, another the Labor Party and Africa, and so on. A couple did Political-Military work; one essentially worked for the Defense Department, handling all of their visitors.

Q: And your job?

NEITZKE: My external brief included all ARA (now WHA) issues, but principally Anglo-Argentine tensions in the aftermath of the Falklands War and British popular opposition to U.S. policy in Central America, primarily Nicaragua and El Salvador. I also covered Greece-Turkey-Cyprus, Gibraltar, and Eastern Europe. Internally, I followed what started out as the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties. But I had another, much more time-consuming chore. Embassy London had for many years singled out one individual in the political section to do a spectrum spanning, state of the nation cable every few weeks; what's the state of Thatcher's hold on things, what are the challenges she's facing, and how might any of this affect U.S. interests. These pieces would range over the entire political landscape. In this capacity I followed Bob Frasure, who, as you know, died tragically trying to get into Sarajevo as part of Dick Holbrooke's team in 1995. Frasure's British politics cables from London were pretty much the gold standard, widely read for their insight, wit, and general erudition.

Q: You were there from when to when?

NEITZKE: From the summer of '86 to the summer of 1990.

Q: What job did your wife have?

NEITZKE: She started out as the U.S. representative to the International Maritime Organization, which is headquartered in London. She was our day to day liaison with it. A multi-agency team from Washington would come over for periodic IMO meetings and she would handle arrangements for those as well. Later she became Civil Air attachï¿½. She was situated in the Econ section, which was nearly as large as the political section.

Q: Well, describe some of the work you did in the Political Section. You said you had the ARA portfolio as well as the-

NEITZKE: As I indicated, my first year there was largely taken up with the looming British general election, ultimately called for June 1987. Again, in a post-Soviet, indeed post 9/11 era, when we face such a different array of challenges, it may be difficult to fathom why we should have cared so much in 1986-87 about a British election. But we did, primarily because, although we could depend on Prime Minister Thatcher to keep British forces strong and fully committed, and nuclear, and although after the Falklands victory she dominated the British political scene, we never ceased worrying about where Britain might turn should something happen to Thatcher, or should she stumble politically. The Labor Party was beginning to shed a bit of its socialist mantle, but

Q: Was this Michael Foote, the Labor Leader?

NEITZKE: No, it was Neil Kinnock. Terrific speaker and debater, a real fighter, very likeable, except on security policy. He's the politician who gave that powerfully evocative speech about his humble origins and the unfairness of life and what the government could do to even the playing field - first in my family to go to college, and so on - the speech that Joe Biden later cribbed from a bit too literally, much to his regret.

Q: Neil Kinnock, oh yes.

NEITZKE: This was well before Tony Blair's new Labor, this was old Labor with a slightly more attractive face, but it remained bent on Britain's denuclearization and Britain's distancing itself from the United States at a time when the Soviet threat remained formidable. Despite a succession of aged and dying leaders, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev still appeared strong; its demise four years later was not then foreseeable. So the U.S. had an enormous stake in the outcome of this British election. And the wild and woolly polling industry in Britain was signaling that Thatcher might be vulnerable. The British press and polls were all over the lot. No one had a firm grip on where this election might go.

The threat could come either from a Labor Party victory alone or from a majority Labor coalition with one of the so-called centrist parties, the Liberals or the Social Democrats, resulting from a hung parliament. The latter, an intriguing possibility in British historical terms, would not have been quite as bad as a Labor victory, but it would have made working with this most intimate of our allies much more difficult.

Q: Who were the ambassador and DCM?

NEITZKE: When I arrived Charlie Price was the ambassador. He knew the President personally and had earlier been Ambassador in Brussels. The DCM, or Minister as he was known, was Ray Seitz, who later went on to become EUR Assistant Secretary and himself Ambassador in London. And Ray had served in London earlier as well, when he'd been the star analyst of another key British general election. So there was pressure to get this right. We basically took the election apart piece by piece, analyzing virtually everything. We consulted academic experts, political commentators, pollsters, politicos, and others.

Q: Well, for example, what are you talking about, what kinds of reporting?

NEITZKE: In the lead up to the election, I prepared a series of five or six so-called primers, lengthy analyses on such topics as the British Constitution - the sum total of British tradition, established practice, and legal precedent, Britain has no written constitution - and what would likely transpire if there were a hung parliament, that is, if no one party achieved a parliamentary majority. Another analyzed the British polling process and explained how it was possible that such supposedly sophisticated pollsters could routinely produce such wildly varying poll results. And it had to do mainly with how polling was then conducted in the UK. In another of these cables, I basically dissected the electoral map, analyzing region by region, district by district, and in some cases, constituency by constituency, how traditional British voting patterns had changed in the preceding decade or so, where each party stood the best prospects of making gains, and so forth. Each of these cables, I recall, was of a pretty staggering length. We would suggest that all but a few readers limit themselves to the summaries, but we sent them all over. And we would hear, not just from those following British affairs in Washington, but from various posts in Europe, that they were being closely read.

Once the election began in earnest, in May of 1987, we were doing a cable or two a day on who was up and who was down and who - this was a British election after all - who'd made the biggest fool of themselves in the preceding 24 fours. All British elections, but especially general elections, are wonderfully colorful affairs, compressed into a few weeks, filled with as much pomp and hilarity - Mad Lord Sutch of the Monster Raving Loonies would somehow manage to pose right next to Thatcher on election night - as serious policy debate. So it was fun, the outcome deadly serious of course, but nonetheless fun to watch and report on. And on many of these cables too, we got compliments from other posts, personal congratulatory messages from other Ambassadors, which doesn't happen all that often.

After the election, which the Tories won handily as it turned out, my internal beat consisted of two elements. The first was to chronicle the nearly comedic demise of the Social Democrats. This was the small but lively left-center party founded by the David Owen-led Gang of Four following its break with Labor in 1981. The Social Democrats had allied themselves with the Liberals in the 1987 general election and, when that election failed to produce the hung parliament they had dreamed of, the center of British political spectrum more or less imploded. Most Social Democrats abandoned Owen to merge with the Liberals in a new party named the Social and Liberal Democrats, later changed to just Liberal Democrats. A tiny faction soldiered on for a couple more years under Owen, who remained, against all political odds, among the most charismatic, talked about figures in Britain. I found Owen a fascinating case study in intellectual brilliance, indomitable ego, and political death wish. By the way, Owen and another of these left-center politicians, whose fortunes I also covered closely, Paddy Ashdown, who led the Liberal Democratic Party from 1988 on, would later resurface in key roles in the Balkans, Owen teaming with Cy Vance to try to broker a ceasefire and peace agreement early in the war, and Ashdown, a decade later, as High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the guy whose job it was to knock heads together when necessary and try to refashion a workable Bosnia.

Q: Well, before we go much further, I want to talk about your other, your external reporting issues, but before we do that why don't you describe a little about what it was like living in London in those years.

NEITZKE: Ours was not your typical London tour. When we flew over, my wife was eight months pregnant. Whether from the aftereffects of the flight or of a too-strenuous day of hiking through many of my wife's old haunts - she'd been a grad student in London - my son was born a month early, a few days after our arrival, when we were still living out of suitcases in an Embassy-owned apartment complex in distant High Gate in North London. It turned out that we'd been made pawns of a sort in a nasty feud between the Admin and Political Counselors over whether Political Officers should continue to receive representational housing in central London. My son's arrival, the fact that we were a tandem, and the fact that Highgate, however charming - it's where Karl Marx is buried among other highlights - was a fairly dirty hour-long tube ride from the Embassy, ended that experiment and we moved to a small house off Kensington Gardens. When my second son was born a year and a half later, we moved again, to a beautiful, larger, Embassy-owned residence in South Kensington. So we became familiar with a bit more of the town than some did just by virtue of our expanding family and various moves.

I mentioned earlier that some people, even after fighting to get there, were unhappy in London - the nearly prohibitive cost of hired help, the long commutes, a lingering IRA security threat, and the all but nonexistent sense of Embassy family that they'd enjoyed at other posts. We, however, were not unhappy; we loved it. We traveled extensively, sometimes on business but more often for family getaways. We found most Brits not only highly literate and unfailingly courteous but endlessly interesting - entertaining is perhaps a better word. Even, contrary to their image, warm and generous. Part of that obviously reflects the fact that we were diplomats, American diplomats and, as such, were granted a limited free pass to mingle at will up and down the class structure in a way that many Brits themselves are not. And too, the closeness of our bilateral relationship, the "special relationship," the sense that on most, though not all, issues we shared a common perspective, lent a certain additional impetus to one's work. And for us personally, the fact that our two sons were born there became part of our overall sense of the place.

As for life in London then, there was a strong sense that you were in a place that mattered. It wasn't just the ubiquitous remnants of empire, or the pomp and ceremony and formality that surrounds so many things British, or the strikingly high caliber of journalism, art, literature and so forth. There was a feeling about the place, part of which was sort of a background sense of physical insecurity. There were IRA bombings throughout the 1980s, one of which, in Brighton in 1983, had almost taken the Prime Minister's life. Whether paranoid overreaction or not, one occasionally did check under one's car before setting out in the morning in those years. Embassy security, always problematic in Grosvenor Square, was constantly being enhanced. And then there was the bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie Scotland in December 1988 and all of the bitter aftermath of that.

There were occasionally other reminders as well that all was not exactly as it appeared on the surface, that although we might speak roughly the same language, and have many common interests, we and the Brits were in some ways very different from one another. For example, I remember once at a formal dinner being well into a conversation on Anglo vs. American sensibilities, or some such, with my British tablemate when she leaned over and, nodding toward a large group of Brits schmoozing together across the room, said, "You know, I shouldn't tell you this, but in private they often laugh at you Americans." Although I responded, "That's okay, in private, we sometimes laugh at them, too," her comment touched a nerve. However reined in it was most of the time, especially around us, a quintessentially British haughtiness would sometimes surface, often either amid a disagreement over policy or when you had inadvertently butchered some arcane British protocolary nicety. Also, despite Thatcher's preeminence and focus on the "special relationship" with Washington, this was a period when many in the political and chattering classes saw Britain's destiny increasingly in Europe and viewed the special relationship with us as an anachronistic hindrance to that movement. And leftwing British papers' were always caricaturing Thatcher as Reagan's poodle, an over the top sentiment that nonetheless resonated at least a bit with our British friends and colleagues. But overall, this was about as warm and intimate and mature a bilateral relationship as you were likely to encounter.

Q: I am curious whether you had any particular faux pas in mind when you referred to, was it, "arcane British protocol?"

NEITZKE: Well, yes, I can think of one or two. There were many. One of my first assignments in London was to ride heard on the visit of a just-released American hostage from Lebanon, a Father Jenco. It was a big deal at the time. The U.S. had helped secure his release, as had the Archbishop of Canterbury's envoy, Terry Waite. That's a story in itself. Waite was a giant of a man with a giant ego and taste for publicity who kept tempting fate until he too was taken hostage and released only many years later. In any event, while we were using one of the small airports outside London for Jenco's departure, there was a delay and a small plane carrying one of the Royals landed. We were all hustled out of sight - to wait while the Royal disembarked and left - but apparently not quickly enough. A few days later the Embassy received a lengthy protest, the gist of which was that we'd committed the sin of violating a Royal's privacy. I think it was Princess Margaret. It was ridiculous. We'd seen her from about 200 yards away. But the thing is, the Royals were only ever to be seen by mere mortals in carefully choreographed situations. At the Diplomatic Ball at Buckingham Palace or the Queen's Tea in the park behind the Palace - both of which we attended along with hundreds of others - every step, every encounter of each of the Royals was planned out in advance. Spontaneity was not welcome, as when, I recall, one frustrated Ball-goer, fearing he might not be among the few selected to touch a Royal hand, burst through the crowd, hand thrust forward, and, to a taken aback Prince Philip, loudly pronounced, "Hi, I'm Jerry from Omaha." I believe he worked in the Commercial Section of the Embassy, though probably not for long..

Q: Okay, let's get back to your job. What were your external reporting duties?

NEITZKE: The most time-consuming, and frequently neuralgic of these was the aftermath of the Falklands War, or, as the Argentines called the islands, the Malvinas. During the brief 1982 war, we had aided the Brits with intelligence and other support. The Brits' victory, not certain at the outset - the Argentine generals who had seized the islands doubted London would fight at all - was an early high water mark for Thatcher as Prime Minister, and, along with her standing up to the unions, and her public demeanor, marked her thereafter as the Iron Lady.

Q: Iron Lady, yes, I remember that. And...

NEITZKE: Just on that, I don't know whether you ever saw Spitting Images. It was a weekly British TV show in which grotesquely caricatured public figures, portrayed by large puppets, were lampooned. In one famous episode, Thatcher was shown seated at a dining table with her male Cabinet members meekly gathered around. The head waiter approached and asked the Prime Minister whether she was ready to order. Thatcher turned and shouted, "Yes, I'll have steak!" To which the now-quivering waiter responded, "Very good, ma'am, and the vegetables?" And Thatcher boomed out, "They'll have steak too!" To all but Thatcher's actual Cabinet, it was hilarious, the talk of the town for weeks. Indicative of just how dominant a figure Thatcher had become, but also how grating and dismissive she was perceived to be personally, not least by her potential male rivals in the Conservative Party.

Getting back to the Falklands, when I arrived in 1986, the Brits remained in firm control of the islands and were bluntly rebuffing suggestions that even over time there might be a negotiated alteration of their status - unless the beleaguered island residents opted for such a change, which, of course, they never would. In Argentina the generals were out and there had been a modest rebirth of democracy under Alfonsin, but recovering the Malvinas, albeit peaceably, remained a touchstone of their policy, as highly emotional for them as it was for London.

Q: Well did the U.S. Government try to act as go-between between Argentina and Great Britain?

NEITZKE: When the Brits declared a protection zone around the islands, and later, an exclusive fishing zone, and tensions again flared, Washington did take the lead behind the scenes in dampening things down. Throughout, ARA, by the late 1980s under Elliot Abrams, was looking for ways to rebuild U.S.-Argentine relations, efforts which included potential weapons transfers and strengthened military to military ties, which made the Brits uneasy, at best. I think some in Washington, ARA and elsewhere, had difficulty imagining how these small, godforsaken frozen islands in the South Pacific could mean so much to Great Britain. But they did, or rather, the fact that British blood had recently been shed to secure them. And it had been costly for the Argentines. The Belgrano...

Q:A cruiser. It was actually an American World War II cruiser which we had sold them.

NEITZKE: It had gone down with the loss of over 300 lives and-

Q: Yes, it had been torpedoed by a British submarine.

NEITZKE: This had been traumatic for the British; no one had anticipated a loss of life on that scale. The Brits are intensely patriotic when the chips are down, but there's also an acute sensitive streak, and that loss of life shocked them. It didn't alter their belief that they had had to defend these islands; this was sovereign British territory. But it shocked them. Sink the Belgrano played for a long time in London and was harshly critical of the government. So this, the war that is, was a deeply felt issue by Thatcher. On the other hand you had, after the horrors of military rule in Argentina, you had a government trying to take the first steps to democratize and come to terms with its past. And an honest broker sitting in Washington, just to give Elliot Abrams his due, might have concluded that the U.S. could conduct a more dynamic, forthcoming policy towards this new Argentine government, even one with a significant military component, without necessarily raising Thatcher's hackles. Sadly, this was not the case. More than four years after the war, emotions still ran too high.

In London, I personally had to tread carefully with this issue. I got to know well the very able, likeable head of the Argentine interests section there, and of course I also had frequent dealings with FCO officials handling the issue. I recall once how personally offended my Argentine colleague seemed on confirming that I had attended an FCO briefing on, I believe it was a military training exercise the Brits planned to conduct around the islands. ARA too was in a swivet over my attendance. Special relationship or not, ARA expected the London Embassy to be strictly neutral on all things Argentine-related, however awkward that might be, but could do nothing once I laid out my rationale in a cable. Another time, I witnessed, as note taker for Price, what was probably the low point in our bilateral dialogue during my time there. In as cold and blunt a tone as I ever witnessed from a senior British official - and, especially when livid, the Brits are capable of a coolness unlike any others - they expressed what had to be Thatcher's personal anger and incredulity that Washington was making a military deal with Buenos Aires that she felt could threaten her hard won victory. How could we not have known what this meant to her?

Well, we did know, we in the Embassy, and we'd been warning Washington all along about her hyper-sensitivity on this issue. But ARA pushed ahead anyway, including promising Buenos Aires a military deal...

Q: Was this not high performance aircraft?

NEITZKE: I believe so. And on returning to the Embassy, at Price's direction I drafted a cable, in essence a bare-fisted indictment of ARA's apparent freewheeling with Buenos Aires and a challenge to the notion put out by ARA and others that we needed to strike an evenhanded balance between relations with Britain, our closest ally, and the government of Argentina. It was a very, very tough cable. Only one other time, as Chief of Mission in Zagreb, did I draft another cable quite like that. This dustup with ARA, however, highlighted a genuine difficulty inherent in the special relationship at that time; it left the Brits with a de facto near-stranglehold on our efforts to forge better relations with a key Latin American, hemispheric neighbor. The fact that London was simultaneously cozying up to Chile as a Southern Cone counterweight further rankled in Washington. We suggested other, more modest ways to move forward with Buenos Aires, but ARA, at least for awhile, was too rattled or too pissed off, or both, to respond. It took time for the dust to settle, and when it did I was clearly on the outs with ARA; Price's signature or not, they knew who had drafted the cable and how I personally felt about the substance of the matter.

On most other ARA issues we had few problems with the Brits, or they with us, at least British officialdom. When Daniel Ortega came to London, for example, and to our surprise was received by Thatcher in Downing Street, she let him plead his case about Washington's perfidy and then lowered the boom. Opposition to our Central American policies, however, was endemic among the British Left, and in much of the press, and we never really overcame that. I recall our once receiving in the Embassy a group of protesters that included the playwright Harold Pinter. My immediate superiors in the Embassy felt that such groups were best handled by receiving them politely, letting them have their say - however offensive that might be - thanking them, and escorting them out. This nice/nice at all costs - we'll never change their minds anyway - attitude tended to drive me up the wall. It wasn't just their patronizing smugness, they were spouting nonsense on the issues. I wanted to take them on, challenge them point by point - what did we stand to lose after all, but I didn't prevail.

As a final point on ARA issues, I might mention that this period also marked another interesting aspect of our Nicaragua policy, our support of the Contras, and Oliver North transited London frequently on matters that we came to understand only much later.

Beyond ARA, I covered Gibraltar and London's on-again, off-again dialogue with Spain on that, as well as the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus, all areas in which the British were often heavily involved.

Q: Well, let's talk a bit about how you report. I mean, here you are an American diplomat in London, and the same would be true of a British diplomat sitting Washington, you have this unbelievably rich menu of sources available to you, of educated opinion, how do you whittle that down, determine which sources are really good, really on the ball?

NEITZKE: On my external issues, there were actually only a few people whose opinions counted for much, who could consistently add value to what you were getting from your FCO and other official contacts. These were often in think tanks, occasionally in other embassies, sometimes journalists. And you would get to know them fairly quickly. Some may have been known by your predecessor and handed down, but not always. The far greater challenge in what you're referring to was on the domestic side. This was pre-internet, before Washington had direct, real-time access to essentially all the written news available to one in London. But even then, in the late 1980s, there was so much bilateral contact, so many visits between London and Washington, it was a serious challenge to tell Washington something it didn't already know, or wouldn't otherwise quickly find out, unless you stayed down in the weeds reporting mostly trivia, for which the audience would be limited to nil.

The trick here, the task, that is, in doing periodic analyses of, say, Thatcher's political health, was to develop your own reporting style and offer a fresh perspective, not the easiest thing to do in a city with some of the best political minds in the world, more quality newspapers than anywhere else in the world, and, regarding Thatcher, on the number one topic of the political chattering classes. But if the reaction of our various readers is any indication, I accomplished at least that, a fresh perspective. Some of this was in the writing style, and, to no little extent, in the packaging of telegrams.

Q: Packaging? You mean...

NEITZKE: If you don't grab them with your title line, and draw them into a punchy, intriguing summary, they're not going to read the thing. It's a marketplace. Readers are overworked, busy. They have to read the cable on the arms control exchange, on the latest shift in an important negotiation, on a bilateral blowup. They don't have to read what you're pedaling about Thatcher's political health or mid-term threats to that health, unless, of course, they're on the desk. So it has to be good, it has to be fresh, it has to grab them.

I know what this sounds like. Most political and econ officers have it drilled into them to keep it short, keep it tight, just the facts, a bit of commentary for policy context, but don't go off on tangents. If it's five pages, make it three, if it's two pages, make it one, and, if it doesn't really need to go at all, don't write it, unless, of course, your boss insists. If everyone hewed to these principles, then Washington would no longer be drowning in paper, and priorities would be attended to in a more efficient, rational manner. But, as you know, that's not how the world actually works. There's often a fierce competition for attention to one's issues, and for the limited reading time of senior officials, in hopes of affecting their thinking, and, consequently, policy.

So, in the kind of reporting I'm talking about here, having something new to say was critical, but knowing how to package it to get it read was equally important. And it's all done on tight deadlines. Invariably the piece has to be on someone's desk by two o'clock this afternoon, no excuses. And it's usually not a simple cable memcon from the day before. It's an original think piece that they want, and they want it to be literate and penetrating, with humorous asides and historical allusions. This is London after all, there's a reputation to uphold.

Q: Okay. Well let's turn back to Thatcher then. How did we view the Thatcher Government at the time?

NEITZKE: As our closest, most reliable ally. And on a personal level, between Thatcher and Reagan, I doubt there'd been a relationship between a British prime minister and a president remotely as warm since Churchill and Roosevelt, and perhaps not even they were as close. They were different people with different styles, of course; Reagan the charmer and Thatcher more openly feisty. And a British Prime Minister had to have a mastery of policy detail, and debating skills in the Commons of a very high order. But on the major ideological points, foreign and domestic, they appeared to me to be soul mates. And they obviously enjoyed being around one another. I had the sense that Thatcher felt close to Nancy Reagan as well. I had several assignments in connection with a Reagan visit to London that brought me close enough to get some sense of this. I don't think any of them were acting. You could see that there was personal warmth.

Q: A real personal warmth?

NEITZKE: Yes. That doesn't sum up the entire relationship, of course. There were ups and downs, and issues, such as the Falklands as I've mentioned, on which our respective interests occasionally diverged. But I think both leaders had a great deal of respect for what the other was attempting to do to reshape their own society, and they largely saw eye to eye on meeting the challenge of the Soviet Union. The tabloid press would often refer to Thatcher as Reagan's poodle. Well, some poodle. I don't think that was the nature of the relationship at all; Thatcher was quite adept at using her closeness to Reagan to advance Britain's interests as well. And let me add, this didn't all happen just by chance, or some quirk of personal chemistry. The relationship required constant tending at all levels.

You've probably heard of the Powell-Powell channel. That was the active communications link between Charles Powell, pronounced Pole, Thatcher's Private Secretary, and Colin Powell, then Reagan's National Security Advisor. That was certainly a measure of the intimacy of the Thatcher-Reagan relationship and of our two governments at that time. Of course that channel could complicate the life of an Ambassador in London, if he weren't quickly apprised of what was being passed back and forth by the Powells. But generally it worked smoothly, in part because of the front office we had in London.

Q: This was Price, you said.

NEITZKE: Yes. Price, and Ray Seitz, his DCM, an extremely able, likeable guy, who probably understood the Brits better than any other American diplomat of the last generation or two. Price left London shortly after Reagan left office and both Seitz and the Political Counselor departed at the end of my third year there, in the summer of 1989. Price's successor was Henry Catto, another friend of the president, from Texas, later head of USIA (United States Information Agency).

Q: I have talked to people who worked in the White House at the time. They said they never liked to see Reagan alone in the office with Maggie Thatcher, or with Brian Mulroney, because Reagan was a person who really liked these two and they were never quite sure that he might not give away the store if left alone.

NEITZKE: I'm not sure what store that might have been. Possibly on some third tier issues, but what exactly were the major issues, from 1986 through 1988, on which Thatcher or Reagan would have had to twist the other's arm? Again, there were all kinds of issues in play, arms control, economic issues, dealing with Gorbachev, UN votes, the Falklands-Argentine cluster of issues, the gamut. And I'm not saying Thatcher lacked the ability to charm Reagan into a concession here or there. I'm sure she did. I just don't think that the "afraid to leave them alone" take on the relationship is any more valid than the Reagan's poodle theme.

Thatcher was basically doing so much that was in our interest, in our shared interest for the most part, that I'm not sure what the fuss would have been about, a fear that Thatcher could privately somehow get to Reagan in a way injurious to our interests, unless perhaps you're talking about how Washington's Latin American hands viewed the Anglo-Argentine situation. Yes, they probably would not have wanted Thatcher to be alone with Reagan.

Q: But, you know, the people in the outer office, the staff, always get nervous that the principals might be saying something or doing something off script. Well, continue. You were talking about how the front office in London was sometimes cut out of the action, out of of communications...

NEITZKE: The point I was trying to make is that U.S. relations with Great Britain are so multifaceted, so active and so intimate in so many areas that staying atop all of that is a perennial difficulty for whoever is running the London Embassy. Price and Seitz were acutely aware of this dimension of the relationship and I think handled it, stayed on top of things, about as well as they could have done. But again, the amount of bilateral contact that officials in various agencies would have with their British counterparts, usually through the embassy but sometimes directly, was enormous. And if as an embassy officer you lagged a couple days in getting up to speed with some communication or another, that wasn't the end of the world. On the other hand, if there were a direct communication between No. 10 Downing Street and the White House on an important breaking issue, you would hope to be made aware of that as quickly as possible, or it could be very awkward, and my sense is that we nearly always were. I understand that this aspect of the relationship, keeping the London Embassy informed, has deteriorated significantly in the succeeding, internet years, however.

Q: People refer to the ambassadors in some of these very high-profile places as being more like travel agents...

NEITZKE: That's not how I'd characterize London. Yes. There was an enormous flow of official travelers. I'm sure the Ambassador's guest bedrooms at Winfield House saw plenty of use. And I'm sure that might occasionally have been distracting, unless, of course the visitors themselves were sufficiently important to dominate that day's official activities. But none of this inhibited the principal officers in the embassy from focusing on their priority issues. Most understood Washington pretty well to begin with. And the flow of Washington travelers was a means, not available on that scale to most posts, of staying abreast of the latest thinking in Washington, thinking that may not yet have made its way into official communications, so it was valuable. And the contact, face time, one could have in London with senior Washington visitors, Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries whom you might not see all that often even if you were in Washington, could be useful from a career standpoint. So although there could be frustrations on this front, we didn't tend to regard the flow of visitors, at least not senior visitors, as sort of time wasted on babysitting freeloaders.

Now CODELs visiting London were in a different category, and there were many of them. Although there were notable exceptions, individual Congressmen or staffers whose visits were all business and always value added - Steve Solarz comes to mind in that regard - many of the larger CODELs especially, which would tack a stop in London onto their itinerary, conducted little or no useful business and did require a lot of care and feeding. But, as I indicated earlier, I have a different take on CODELs than most FSOs, even so-called Congressional junkets. If I had to choose between devoting time to casual Congressional travelers or, on the other hand, having a Congress too politically fearful or simply too uninterested to travel abroad much, I'd opt for the former in a heartbeat. From what I saw, Congressional travel, even if it wasn't always strictly business related, opened minds and broadened perspectives.

Q: Let us talk a bit more about your reporting of British political events and forces. You had the Liberals and the Social Democrats and others had Labor and the Tories. What was your reading of some of these groups and their leaders, their view of the world?

NEITZKE: In the June 1987 election Thatcher led her party to a third consecutive general election victory, something that hadn't been done in over a century and a half. So she felt in a position to press forward with her domestic reform agenda, taking on the local councils and so forth. And she did so in a pretty headstrong way, which eventually led to the so-called poll tax fiasco a couple years later, one of the first significant signs of her political vulnerability. But 1988 marked the height of her power and dominance. There was serious speculation that she might still be in power in the year 2000. It was actually hard even to imagine the British political scene without her.

I recall that, just as in Belgrade we would every year drag out and update the "after Tito, what?" analysis, so too in London we and others would periodically speculate on Britain's future if Thatcher, as it was sometimes put, fell under a bus. The stock answer to that, by the way, was, "what bus would dare?" But the possibility of her sudden departure was, at the height of her power, almost imponderable, which seems strange in retrospect, since her political end, when it came, was rather swift. She rubbed a lot of people who might have sympathized with her on policy the wrong way. And although most Tory backbenchers would endure nearly any slight to stay in power, to keep their seat in a Parliamentary majority, some of Thatcher's closest male Tory colleagues in and out of the Cabinet, I'm thinking here of Michael Heseltine, Geoffrey Howe, and others, found it increasingly hard to abide her manner. Some too, even some who shared her strong aversion to the Brussels bureaucracy, found her attitude toward certain aspects of European integration needlessly hostile. So even as she dominated, her margin for serious error was narrowing.

I've already described what happened to the center-left parties after 1987, their implosion and realignment and renaming, after they failed in that election to replace Labor as Britain's second leading political grouping. I recall in the immediate run-up to the election a widespread feeling, in the center-left and beyond as well, that Labor might never again win a British general election. Seriously. You could have gotten decent odds on such a bet at that time. Which of course sounds crazy now in the light of Tony Blair's radical makeover of Labor and his three general election victories, tying Thatcher. But that was the reality back then; Labor had sunk that low. In a way, one almost felt sorry for Neil Kinnock; he was a terrifically engaging politician, but he and his shadow cabinet always seemed to me transitional figures, excellent debaters, formidable Parliamentary opponents, but I could never visualize Neil Kinnock in Downing Street or, say, Gerald Kaufman, the shadow foreign secretary, in the FCO. But, just to be honest, I also could not see a John Major succeeding a Margaret Thatcher. And he did succeed her.

Q: Well, on the Labor leadership, I had the impression these guys were way to the left, that they would get together and sing The Red Banner or something...

NEITZKE: Even under Kinnock the party had begun to move a bit. These were not the hardened Socialists of old Labor, bent on tearing down much of British society. They were still way out of the mainstream of Thatcher's Britain, but not as bad as you suggest. In terms of wallowing in one's self-centered convictions, I don't think that Labor had a monopoly on that; they would all do it. Which reminds me. There was a curious and terrifically entertaining British political institution that I should mention: the annual fall conference season. Chautauqua time by the seaside is I think how I once described it in a cable. You had your social season starting in the spring and going through the races and the concerts and all of that and moving on to this political spectacle in the fall. It was all part of the cycle of British public life. In any event, every autumn, after the August doldrums, the faithful of each political party would gather convention-style in some resort town, usually by the sea, to mix and mingle, listen to endless speeches, booze it up, and generally reassure themselves of their own innate goodness and wisdom and their adversaries' misguided ways.

And it was part of our job, those of us who followed domestic politics in the political section, to attend these gatherings, mingle with the luminaries and the locals, and try to detect where things might be headed. It was a unique experience. And, to give them their due, Thatcher may have run the country but Labor and the center-left parties almost always put on a better show, lots more eccentrics, lots weirder digressions, many more hotheads grabbing the mike for their annual rant. More seriously, some in the Labor Party in those days were struggling with how to become more electable, struggling against their ideological predisposition to adopt positions patently unpopular with the generally conservative bent of the population at large. Thatcher had effectively gutted the union movement. They weren't a significant force. Although we still had a labor attachï¿½ in the political section who followed them closely, attended their annual conferences and so on, none of that was taken terribly seriously. And although once in a while there would be a direct blast from a significant player at one of these conferences at the U.S., Anglo-American ties, or Britain's nuclear defense, most often they focused on domestic issues, attacks on Thatcher's social agenda.

Q: Now, moving back to other events in this period, this may not have been your area, but you had the earthshaking events of the latter part of 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down-

NEITZKE: Well, I did want to talk about that, for two reasons. The first is that Bush's inauguration in January 1989 brought about a change in the atmosphere of the bilateral relationship. Thatcher and Reagan had been, in a sense, equal partners, in terms of how they regarded one another, in an extraordinarily close, long-term relationship. They had been through a lot together. Although Thatcher obviously preferred Bush over Dukakis in the 1988 election, and was anxious to be on good terms with him, it's fair to say that privately, at least initially, she didn't view Bush as, well, fighting in the same weight class as her friend Ronnie. She was more experienced on the world stage than Bush, had been Prime Minister for nearly ten years at that point, and appeared to regard herself, although not in a gratuitously arrogant way, as the senior partner, at least in one sense, in this new relationship, notwithstanding the gross disparity in power and influence between our two countries. This was all a very muted thing, though. I don't recall a specific statement, or incident, or slight. It may have been more her tone than anything. She often sounded schoolmarmish, even imperious. Whatever it was, and it's possible this originated more on our side of the Atlantic than in London, the Bush team signaled early on, although again in a muted way, not only that they didn't see Thatcher as the senior partner of anything but that Thatcher's counsel might carry somewhat less weight under Bush than it had under Reagan. This was not an open falling out or anything, but there was a distinct early change in the bilateral atmosphere.

And one issue on which this faint discord manifested itself in 1989 and 1990 was precipitated by the falling of the Berlin Wall in late 1989, that is, the sudden possibility of a reunited Germany. You know, you live in a place for a few years, read widely, speak to lots of experts and commentators, and you think you've pretty much figured it out. And then something happens to alter your basic perception of the place. You couldn't travel anywhere in Britain without appreciating that the nation's long history of warfare, and especially the two World Wars, were an elemental part of the national identity. So too was British standoffishness, its clinging stubbornly to its currency and system of weights and measures, for example, despite Continental pressures. But what you didn't see every day, until the Wall fell, was the reservoir of anger and mistrust of the German nation that many Britons still felt. And I'm sure you recall that Thatcher was not bashful about expressing her strong misgivings over what a reunited Germany might portend for the future of Europe. Support for reunification became one of the hallmarks and signal successes of Bush's approach to Europe, but it came essentially against the backdrop of Thatcher's kicking and screaming. That didn't prevent Thatcher and Bush, who essentially liked one another, from getting on together. As Bush placed his stamp on the Presidency, the push to German reunification became unstoppable, and our two governments cooperated very closely in the showdown with Saddam Hussein after he invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1990. The relationship did settle into a groove, based on genuine mutual respect, but it was never quite the same as it had been with Reagan.

Q: Well, you said you followed Eastern Europe. Did the events there affect your work in any way?

NEITZKE: Yes. And that's the second point I wanted to make, in addition, that is, to the brief cooling of the bilateral atmosphere. Despite the size of Embassy London, no one else there had anywhere near the experience that I had had with the region and our policy toward it. So I watched this closely. Another benefit of serving in a place like London is that everybody sends you their cable traffic. You could read all you wanted, and I welcomed that. And there were first-class local experts to compare perspectives with.

I mentioned earlier that during my time both in Eastern European Affairs and in Derwinski's office I had closely followed and occasionally ventured into the endless debate over the extent to which the U.S. had been or could be a critical long-term player in Eastern Europe, whether we had the political will or wherewithal to effect dramatic change in that area. And I think I mentioned the almost reflexive reluctance of State's East European hands to respond forcefully when there was a crackdown of some sort in Eastern Europe, lest they find themselves cut out of the action. By the mid-1980s, the question was whether the limited ferment then evident in Eastern Europe would lead to permanent change and, if so, whether the agents of that change were more likely to be reformed communist elites in the various countries or non-government, non-Party actors.

I recall a trip that Deputy Secretary Whitehead made to a number of Eastern European capitals in 1987 or so, in which he repeatedly, clearly indicated a USG belief that our best bet in the looming change question lay with the Communist elites, that engaging them would be key in our helping to facilitate change in the region. I thought that take on things was wrong, that whether change was imminent anywhere in the region or not, we ought not indiscriminately embrace the powers that be in hopes of steering them toward a more humane, democratic type of rule. It was, in essence, an abandonment of differentiation. I thought that any additional effort or resources we were willing to put into the region should go to groups on the outs, the dissidents, human rights activists, and so forth.

And then something remarkable happened. The EUR front office, in a cable to all European posts from EUR Principal Deputy Tom Simons entitled "Invitation to the Dance," opened the floor to a frank, no-holds-barred, front channel discussion among EUR chiefs of mission on these very policy issues. I don't know what got into Tom, or, for that matter, Roz Ridgway, then EUR Assistant Secretary, why they thought such an effort would go anywhere given the seasoned reticence of most senior FSOS to challenge policy in a frontal way, let alone in a front channel debate with their peers. But I thought Simons and Ridgway deserved enormous credit for having undertaking the effort.

Q: This cable went out when?

NEITZKE: Early 1988 I think.

Q: But this was before the collapse?

NEITZKE: Yes, of course. The Wall was still up. The Soviets were still in charge. And nobody had then predicted the collapse of communism. At the time Simons invited everyone to this grand debate, it appeared that we'd already cast our policy lot, exemplified by the Whitehead trip, with those who had long argued for a less discriminating ratcheting up of our engagement with nearly all of the ruling communist elites of Eastern Europe. Predictably, the silence was deafening; nobody wanted to take the floor, or the mike, as it were. After further urging, a couple of posts ventured brief cables offering support for our heightened pace of activity in the region. The rest said nothing.

I couldn't resist the challenge. This was a subject I knew about and cared about. And here was an unexpected invitation to an open debate. So after Simons sent out another plea, essentially "come on guys, let's hear what you think," I drafted a cable entitled "Invitation to the Dance: The Punch Bowl Perspective," and got the front office in London to send it out untouched. I argued, mainly through posing a series of questions, that key elements of our emerging new approach to Eastern Europe were wrong-headed. I said there seemed to be a lot of loose talk about historic opportunities, dynamic strategies, and the supposedly decisive role the U.S. could play in the region. I said that in fact there was precious little the United States could do to alter the course of events in Eastern Europe in any fundamental way and that in the preceding several administrations we had shown clearly that we were incapable of consistently marshalling the will and resources to support any creative, potentially transformative policy line with these countries. I argued that, in any event, the forces most likely to transform this region were not those in government and Party ranks, to which we were then in the process of cozying up; real change, if and when it came, was far more likely to come from the currently disenfranchised. Trying to foster a somehow more natural relationship with these necessarily very authoritarian regimes was taking us down the wrong path. I suggested that we tone down the exuberant rhetoric and aim our efforts, instead of at the elites, at cultural penetration, to reach more of the people, and I suggested a few modest steps to that end

I said all of this after offering apologies to the ambassadors and FSOs in the front line Eastern European missions, lauding the tough work they were doing day in and day out, and noting what a genuinely rare opportunity it was to be invited to offer views on other posts' main foreign policy preoccupations. It was a lengthy cable. It was blunt, and, as I said, it went out untouched by others in the mission. The punch bowl perspective was an allusion, I said, to the perhaps alcohol-induced euphoria of some of those most anxious to jump into the Eastern European dance and presume that we could critically influence events in the area.

Now in normal times, if Embassy London or anyone else in Western Europe had sent in a cable like this, unsolicited, on sensitive issues supposedly beyond their ken, you would have opened yourself up for a strong, possibly even ad hominem blast from posts in the region, plus a call from somebody way up in State saying, you know, what the hell do you think you're doing? But this was different. We'd been invited not once but twice to weigh in.

The reaction to my cable was not long in coming. Posts not on our long list of addressees were calling in asking for repeats. Officers began hearing from colleagues to the East that the cable was not only being read but was provoking extended debates within embassies. They wanted to know who had written it. A couple of posts thanked us for airing our views while neither agreeing nor disagreeing with their thrust. And a day or two later, Simons himself sent out a congratulatory cable to London, info-ing the rest of Europe, not agreeing or disagreeing with us, but noting how well we had laid out one side of the debate. So that was gratifying. In the meantime, however, I learned that a colleague in Embassy London, a water-walker's water-walker, who has since risen in the Service higher and faster than all but a couple officers of my generation, had been at pains to assure Simons and others in Washington that he'd had absolutely nothing to do with the cable.

I mention this episode not to pat myself on the back for being right on every point, because I wasn't, although, when the Wall did come down at the end of 1989, the elites in most countries were pretty swiftly swept aside. This episode illustrated in spades the extreme reticence of many senior FSOs to do anything that might place them - on the written record - on the wrong side of an eventual policy decision, and potentially threaten their careers.

After retiring, I led the dissent portion of several sessions of the mid-career or political tradecraft course at FSI, and I would cite this example to illustrate both the aversion to open policy debate, let alone dissent, among many FSOs and the possibility that front channel reporting occasionally affords for airing dissenting views.

Q: Okay. Well, on the policy matter, Eastern Europe, or any other key area for that matter, it is very hard, the people involved there in policy matters cannot really say, you know, we cannot control this, we're not important players, it will just all be played out within Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. We're just minor players.

NEITZKE: Yes. That's the tendency. A gung-ho approach, inflated rhetoric, and a clouded perspective about what realistically can and can't be done. Which made what Simons and Ridgway did, inviting everyone to debate our policy toward Eastern Europe, extraordinary.

As for the marked reluctance to downplay one's own or one's government's importance in an issue, however, this is really something of a disease. We tend to focus on the disease of clientitis, whereby the embassy overseas falls in love with local culture and society, gets too close to the local government, and becomes an advocate for that government's views with Washington. Well, there is a related disease in Washington, particularly dealing with regimes with which we have a tenuous relationship, that at all costs, whatever happens, we must not react so strongly that we foreclose future options. We must never take ourselves out of the game. That attitude, at its worst, is going to limit, perhaps severely, your options for responding to what might be truly egregious actions by an authoritarian regime.

Q: Well, regarding a full-blown debate on an important issue, or new policy course, which you point out is very rare, one of the other things I have noted is a tendency in Washington that when an issue comes up, some of the first people dropped off are the experts. I think we already discussed this a little. They may be arguing that you cannot do this or that or they may point out things that nobody wants to have pointed out. And those cutting off the debate are not just political types, they are Foreign Service too. They may have already gotten the National Security Council onboard. They may have already gotten media support for whatever they are trying to do. They may have already gotten Senate staff onboard. And they are ready to go ahead with their plan. They don't want a lot of discussion or second guessing by experts, whether it's coming from Embassies overseas or anywhere else.

NEITZKE: Right. Again, that's what made this invitation to the dance, to the policy debate on Eastern Europe, so unusual. Some in Washington may have had misgivings themselves about an overly activist approach, or they may have tried and failed to win the kinds of backing for such an approach from outside the Department, from the NSC, the Pentagon, media, and so on, that you mentioned. Whatever the genesis of this exercise, though, it was incredibly refreshing, however short-lived, as events in Eastern Europe itself quickened and let ultimately to the transformation we witnessed in late 1989 and early 1990.

Q: Did any of those changes, those earth-shaking events, affect any of you in London?

NEITZKE: Not personally, other than in the sense, of course, that they altered history, rocked one's basic sense of what the future was likely to hold, in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and beyond. As an Embassy, however, we were just distant observers, wonder-struck like everyone else when the Wall came down. It was a fascinating thing to behold, but it took time for what this might mean to sink in, and then the Soviet Union itself began to unravel. How many of us expected to see that in our lifetime? Meeting the Soviet challenge, after all, was what had preoccupied us during most of our working lives.

Q: Sure.

NEITZKE: And it wasn't long after the fall of the Wall that this rift in perceptions between us and the Brits, Thatcher herself, over the inevitability or desirability of German reunification, began to surface. On this issue I don't think Thatcher ever came around before she left office. As I said, that issue added strain to a Bush-Thatcher relationship that was never on a par with the Reagan-Thatcher relationship. And Thatcher in this period was going all out on her domestic reforms, some of which were beyond the pale even to some of her former supporters. She was beginning to encounter real resistance. Although this happened very shortly after I left, she did get a boost after Saddam invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and international tensions rose. We and the Brits saw more quickly than most others what needed to be done. And there was that meeting between Bush and Thatcher at the home of our ambassador, Henry Catto, in Colorado I believe, at which Thatcher is said to have urged Bush not to "go wobbly" on militarily confronting Saddam. Planning for the liberation of Kuwait with Britain's active cooperation did a lot, I understand, to infuse the Bush-Thatcher relationship with some of the warmth that had earlier been lacking.

Q: Okay. Well anything to add before leaving London? You had been there, what, four years? We did not discuss the running of the Embassy. Was there anything especially notable in that regard, anything that affected you personally?

NEITZKE: We were there four years. As for the running of the place, maybe just to note the de facto decapitation of the Embassy after my third year, in the summer of 1989, when the Ambassador, DCM, Political Counselor, and Deputy Political Counselor all left along with, I believe, the ECON Counselor. That left me the senior Embassy holdover on the Political side. I became Deputy Political Counselor, a position that doesn't exist in many embassies but in London at that time was a significant supervisory job. I became rating officer for all of my former peers in the section and had authorizing authority for their outgoing cables. It was my first serious supervisory job since running the Visa Section way back in Belgrade. And with everybody above me in the Embassy new to London, I was called upon in a number of instances when events were breaking rapidly and historical context was needed quickly. We left London in July 1990.

Q: Where did you go?

NEITZKE: I'd gotten a couple job offers in Washington but didn't want to go back to State just then. And it happened to be a lousy year to be looking for a DCM-ship, which would have interested me. I had also been offered senior training, the National War College in Washington, but in the end I opted instead for the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. Newport seemed like an interesting place to spend a year and, unlike the National War College at that time, it offered a Master's Degree program in National Security Policy.

Q: Okay. You did that from when to when?

NEITZKE: The academic year 1990 to 1991.

Q: That would have been an interesting time to be there because you arrived just as we were beginning to prepare to go to war in the Gulf. How did you find Newport?

NEITZKE: Unexpectedly hot and humid, but fascinating. We moved into a small house by the ocean, little more than a hovel really. The wind blew right through it, but you looked out the front of the house and the water was right there, waves pounding the rocky shoreline nonstop. It was wonderful family time. And toward the end of our year there our daughter was born in Newport Hospital.

Newport itself is many cities rolled into to one, in some respects still similar to the "nine cities of Newport" Thornton Wilder described in Theophilus North, the mansions of the robber barons, the immigrant servants' community, the military community, the preserved 17th and 18th century sections, the seamen's quarter, and so on. .

The Naval War College proved to be a mixed bag. Portions of the program were, as advertised, academically rigorous, particularly the several months spent studying strategy debates and lessons learned in a dozen or so wars from ancient Greece through Vietnam. Lots of reading, lots of papers to write and critique, lots of seminar-style discussions. That was useful. Other sections, such as the one on the determinants of National Security Policy, were at a more basic level. I was occasionally asked to come up front and elaborate on subjects based on my experience in Washington, which I was happy to do. The thing is, while they add in a few of us civilians, and a few foreign military officers, this program is designed for a different type of person altogether, that is, for Navy Captains or soon to be Captains, and Army and Air force Colonels with long field operational resumes, many of whom were about to enter the Washington policy fray for the first time, in staff jobs at the Pentagon or elsewhere.

It was my first opportunity to spend a lot of time around the military, to get to know their mindsets. And that was enlightening, particularly what they felt about the recurring subject of honor. Almost to a man, and it was nearly all men, they interpreted honor in a way intrinsically tied to the dangers that they faced as soldiers, a sense of honor that almost by definition excluded all non-military. So we had a number of lively discussions on that topic.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you wrote a paper on Yugoslavia at the War College.

NEITZKE: That was in the third portion of the program, the spring of 1991, when the Navy and other military students did a more operational segment. I opted instead to do an independent research project on the national question in Yugoslavia, which I thought would provide a useful refresher for my coming assignment as Consul General in Zagreb. The paper, as I think I mentioned, was titled, "Yugoslavia: Was it Ever Meant to Be?" It ran about 150 pages, was heavily sourced, and was well received by the faculty. Or, I guess I should say it got the highest grade possible but left some of the senior faculty troubled by my clear implication that the United States was almost certain eventually to be drawn into the mess that Yugoslavia would shortly become.

In late 1990 the CIA had done a study indicating that Yugoslavia was likely to fracture and break up and that it could be quite bloody. I thought that was correct, and I argued that, in light of the religious and nationality makeup of places like Bosnia in particular, it was all but certain the breakup would be accompanied by bloodshed on such a scale that Yugoslavia's neighbors, and NATO and the U.S., would be drawn in. But I mistakenly assumed that this intervention would be swift and forceful, that Humpty Dumpty would be put back together again and maintained in some sort of balance indefinitely. And I was hearing from the Office of East European Affairs at State around that time that, although heightened tension and some violence was likely, it would mostly have run its course by the time of my arrival in mid-1992. On the issue of eventual U.S. military intervention, however, I was directly challenged during my formal presentation by one of the Deans at the College, who argued that the U.S. military - then fresh from its lightening victory in the first Gulf War - must and would avoid intervention in the Balkans at all costs.

I wish I'd taken that officer's challenge more to heart. Because once things turned really ugly in the former Yugoslavia, in Bosnia in the spring and summer of 1992, no one fought harder or more effectively to keep America on the sidelines during the height of the slaughter, and to cloud the truth of what was happening, than the Pentagon, particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It wouldn't have changed things, of course, but at least I'd have been less taken aback by how dirty they were prepared to fight when the chips were down.

The only other point regarding that research is that it made clear that, while the nationality issue had plagued what would become Yugoslavia since the 19th century, except in World War II it had never manifested itself in widespread violence and killing. It had played out almost entirely in the political arena. So when Yugoslavia came violently apart, and the non-interventionists began to argue that this was merely the latest outbreak of age old inter-ethnic carnage, that these people had been killing one another for centuries, that was nonsense.

Q: I want to get into all of that a little later. First, what was it like for all these officers to be in Newport, to be stuck at the War College during Desert Storm and all?

NEITZKE: Very painful. Not only were they way out of their professional element in Newport, with rumors abounding about post-Soviet military cutbacks and draw downs of U.S. forces that might threaten their own futures, but they had to sit and watch daily as their peers fought and won this impressive victory. This hard-charging group of officers, who felt they had spent the bulk of their service lives under a post-Vietnam cloud of disfavor, had to sit there watching the run up to the war in late 1990 and then the brilliant execution of it and the hero's welcome for the returning troops. Many of them would have given anything to leave the War College and go off and fight, but none was allowed to do that as far as I know.

Q: How did they, looking back at the military strategy part of your course, what was the general view on Vietnam?

NEITZKE: They were reluctant to see Vietnam as a failure. But to the extent it was a failure, they saw it as a failure of the U.S. political house, not the military. The lesson they drew was that you don't go to war with half-hearted public support, or worse, with an open ended commitment and no plan for winding it up. They were still stung by Vietnam. Some appeared to feel almost humiliated by it, not by a loss but by the overall experience; they had given it their best and the nation had not supported them. There wasn't a whole lot of nuance in their sentiments about Vietnam. By that time Vietnam was 15 years in the past and much had been published about how we had probably exaggerated the communist threat, the domino danger, and so forth, although I'm not sure I heard anyone offer a plausible scenario for avoiding those kinds of miscalculations in the future.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the Navy was looking around for its next potential major enemy, the next big threat to prepare for? Was China being looked at in that regard?

NEITZKE: There were strategy and war gaming groups affiliated with the school, which did longer range thinking of that sort, but I didn't find much of that among the more operationally oriented officers with whom I was going to class. A central purpose of the College is to get these guys to start thinking in a more disciplined way about strategy and policy. But I didn't see much of it at the classroom level. The concerns most voiced were more career oriented. Would there be room for them in a new, smaller force structure? Or, how was war fighting likely to evolve, rather than, say, who were our emerging enemies?

I recall once, when I was leading a classroom discussion, making the case that if you were looking at potential problems down the road North Korea was likely to be one of them. There was sort of a dumbfounded reaction; how could I be so off base; Korea's not going to be a problem. Some of them wouldn't be budged. And, as I said, in defending my thesis on Yugoslavia, that the United States eventually would be drawn in, this too met resistance. So it was a mixed bag; there were some big thinkers there, some good writers, and some distinguished faculty; but many of the students, the officers, seemed in need of just this type of a program before they headed off to Pentagon staff jobs.

Q: Well then in '91 you were-?

NEITZKE: I'd been paneled to the Zagreb Consul General job beginning in the summer of 1992. Since it had been 14 years since I'd spoken Serbo-Croatian, and had never had the full program or as much mastery of the language as I'd wanted, I did essentially a long refresher at FSI. Except that when I got to FSI it became clear I wouldn't be enhancing my Serbo-Croatian as much as relearning it in an evolving Croatian variant.

Q: You said something earlier about the atmosphere in the FSI Serbo-Croatian program at that time I think.

NEITZKE: Things were ugly. This was the late summer and fall of 1991. Slovenia had broken free, but the Serbs, the JNA and their Serbian subsidiaries in Eastern Slavonia and the Krajina were fighting much harder to hang onto parts of Croatia. Accounts of atrocities were surfacing, but the casualty figures were still comparatively small. The...

Q: Let me just interrupt here, if I might. Could you explain what the Krajina was?

NEITZKE: Sure. The term roughly translates as "borderlands" and refers to a long narrow stretch of Croatia abutting the western border of Bosnia. It had been mainly Serb-inhabited for centuries, following the Austrians' settling of Serbs in the area to serve basically as a protective military barrier for western Christendom against the Ottomans. It's where some of the earliest fighting took place in the Croatian War. Belgrade was determined not to let a breakaway Croatia absorb this historically Serbian area.

Q: Okay, you were saying, about the atmosphere at FSI.

NEITZKE: By late summer 1991, the fighting had already become daily front page news. Some of the FSI language instructors still had family in Yugoslavia. Feelings were raw. As each new outrage came to light, it would be posted in sort of a daily war of the hallway postings. This didn't detract that much from our language study; it may even have intensified our efforts in light of all the press play being given to the area to which we were headed.

Then as the war in Croatia progressed, the Department began to think more seriously about staffing levels in Zagreb and Belgrade. Yugoslavia was coming apart, so would Embassy Belgrade need to be as large as it had always been? Was Zagreb likely to become an Embassy in its own right? And given the level of violence in the area, might both posts need to be ratcheted down for the time being? When JNA jets strafed downtown Zagreb in the late fall of 1991 in an attempt to kill Tudjman, almost succeeding, ConGen Zagreb evacuated all official American dependents, and even the remaining officers fled the country briefly, returning with a skeleton crew of five or six who would run the ConGen until mid-summer 1992. So as our language training wore on, there was uncertainty as to who would actually get out to post.

It was a strange atmosphere. There was one occurrence in particular at FSI that I'll never forget. Some of the Serbian instructors arranged, or allowed others to arrange for us, students and instructors alike, a session aimed at, well, I'm not sure what it was aimed at, other than perhaps distorting our perception of what was then happening in the former Yugoslavia. Serbian forces were pummeling Vukovar and other cities and towns in Eastern Slavonia; they had seized much of the Krajina, driving out Croats from that mainly Serb area, had been shelling Split and Dubrovnik, and so on. The Croats were far from angels, but the carnage and killing at that point were lopsidedly of Serbian doing. Yet there was this session at FSI in which young Croats - I have no idea where they found them - were tearfully seeking the forgiveness of their Serbian counterparts for crimes committed by the Ustashe against Serbs in World War II. The timing and staging of this were beyond inane. I walked out. But in a way, this episode too was more instructive than I gave it credit for. It was a clear indicator of how the Serbian community, Serbian-Americans, Serbian exiles, and other Serbian sympathizers would later react when the media began daily documenting much larger-scale Serbian crimes in Bosnia. Play the victim. Dredge up World War II. Turn the images on their head. And they were very, very effective in doing so - for a while.

Q: I was wondering, did you find in the men and women, the Foreign Service men and women who were training in this language, was there a division growing between those going to Croatia and those going to Serbia.

NEITZKE: To some extent because the country...

Q: Was this beginning to affect the relationships you would have with each other later on?

NEITZKE: No. I don't think the tensions at FSI contributed much to that. The officers preparing to head out behaved professionally and got along well with one another. But it was different, no question, from when I'd last studied Serbo-Croatian in the mid-1970s and we were all going out to the same country. It was changed now, and people knew it, so there was a bit more distance between the two groups.

Q: Was it the sort of situation at FSI where, because of what was happening, you had to check your status, the status of your assignment, once a day with the Yugoslav desk?

NEITZKE: The newspapers were chronicling Yugoslavia's implosion. So people did tend to look over their shoulder more than usual to see whether their assignment was holding, whether one or the other post might have to be closed, or whether they'd have to go out alone and make separate arrangements for their spouse and children.

Q: Was your wife scheduled to work in Zagreb?

NEITZKE: No. There were a couple of problems in that regard. I'm not sure whether the Service has yet worked this out, but in those days mid or senior-level tandem assignments to small posts were difficult to impossible. Zagreb staffing numbers mushroomed in the year and a half after I arrived, but when I arrived there were only five or six officers. I would either have been directly supervising my wife, or supervising her supervisor. That's not ideal, and possibly not even legal. During the latter part of our three years there, if she had wanted to work, we could have arranged some way to circumvent me for rating and reviewing purposes, but it still would have been awkward. In any event, she didn't want to work just then.

Q: She had just had a baby.

NEITZKE: She had had our daughter in April 1991 and then gone back to work, on the Canadian desk, during our year in Washington. But we were taking three children under seven years old into the fringes of a war zone. We weren't anxious for her too to leave home every day and come in to work.

Q: Alright. Well, let's talk a little about how you prepared yourself for this assignment, as Consul General, I mean outside of language instruction.

NEITZKE: It was different, obviously, from preparing to take charge of a post in a country at peace. The situation in the former Yugoslavia when I was consulting around Washington was fluid, to say the least. In fact, by the late spring of 1992, it didn't look as though I'd be Consul General very long. Zagreb would likely become an embassy shortly after my arrival.

I spoke with a lot of people. The most useful on the Hill was Mira Barata, a staffer for then Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole. Dole, with her help, was and would remain the most influential and ultimately most effective non-administration player on U.S. policy toward the former Yugoslavia. It would be Dole's threat in the summer of 1995 - then as Senate Majority Leader and probable 1996 presidential contender - to lift the arms embargo, for which he had solid majority backing, that would help force Clinton's hand, force the U.S. Government finally to get serious about Bosnia.

Elsewhere, and especially within the Administration, the post-Gulf War Bush Administration, I found little sense of urgency. The senior NSC Staffer with whom I met, an Army officer I believe, showed little concern either about the possibility that Yugoslavia's unraveling might eventually draw in the U.S. or about the conflict's burgeoning humanitarian dimension. And at the CIA, in a couple officials with whom I met there, I found a clearly Serbo-philic reaction to what was happening and a focus more on evolving U.S. policy than on analysis. They saw Tudjman as the main problem; we needed to get tough with him. Here too, there was little concern for the emerging humanitarian catastrophe.

Q: This would be Franjo Tudjman you are speaking of, the President, or whatever he was then, of the breakaway Croatian state?

NEITZKE: Yes, Tudjman, a man many in Washington, especially the ex-Belgrade hands, found extremely unattractive. He was an ex-communist, ex- JNA general who had been imprisoned by Tito for Croatian nationalist tendencies, a historian who had written books faulted in part for underestimating Ustashe crimes. He was seen in Washington as a champion of Croatian nationalism, a cause that many still associated with terrorist threats to the Yugoslav state in the 1970s and earlier.

Q: Well, what about at State? What else were you picking up in your consultations there?

NEITZKE: It wasn't much different from elsewhere. By the late spring of 1992 the objective of staying out of the Yugo mess as far as possible, of offering some humanitarian aid but essentially letting the Europeans run the show, was already deeply entrenched at State, at least at the policy level. INR officers told me that although by early spring 1992 there were scattered, fragmentary reports of large-scale, almost exclusively Serbian-conducted atrocities, there wasn't much interest in them on the 7th floor, the Baker-Eagleburger 7th floor. These INR officers explained that this lack of interest dated from the fall of 1991, where, again, most of the reporting was of Serbian outrages perpetrated against Croatian cities. The 7th floor had made it clear, they said, that unless INR's analysis were more "balanced" they weren't interested in reading it. In fact, they...

Q: Explain balanced, what they, what INR meant.

NEITZKE: It meant that the 7th floor, and Eagleburger's name was usually invoked in this regard, disagreed, or perhaps it's better to say disbelieved, that the atrocities being committed in the former Yugoslavia were anywhere near as lopsidedly of Serbian commission as was being reported, especially in the press. "Balanced" reporting and analysis, the 7th floor believed, would show that the Croats were nearly equally to blame. I later learned several things that lent credence to INR's take on the 7th floor's predilections. First, Eagleburger, when discussing the Yugoslav crisis with foreign officials, would typically confide to them that the USG had strong evidence - sensitive intelligence was the implication - that the Croats were behaving just as badly as the Serbs. Secondly, from an officer at Embassy Belgrade in the fall of 1991 who witnessed it first-hand, I learned that Warren Zimmerman, our Ambassador, had explicitly told his staff that Washington wanted more reporting on Croatian excesses to balance out what was streaming in about the Serbs. I don't know whether Warren himself agreed with this strained emphasis on so-called balanced reporting; he was a pretty upright guy. But it was clear at Embassy Belgrade, this officer said, that there was a high premium on reporting Croat crimes.

This is an issue I know we're going to get to again as we go through my time in Croatia. Washington's, the Department 7th floor's, refusal to accept that the killing, raping, and ethnic cleansing, especially in Bosnia, was as one-sided as it was kept manifesting itself in strange, sometimes highly unprofessional ways. But we can get into more of that later.

Q: Yes, well, we will, but you were saying about your consultations before going...

NEITZKE: At State, my consultations in the Department. Where I was not hearing much about the humanitarian tragedy then unfolding in Bosnia but instead about how we needed to clamp down on the Croats. Even in the Policy Planning Staff, from a guy who was deeply moved by what was happening in Bosnia, the advice was to keep a tight rein on Tudjman. And in the EUR front office, where you'd go for your final marching orders, as it were, there was an attitude bordering on nonchalance, or at least the appearance that Yugoslavia's disintegration wasn't weighing heavily on them. In essence, their stance was, it's not our problem and it's not going to become our problem. I also met with Eagleburger's top aide, an old colleague from Belgrade, who reflected the same attitude.

In the late spring and early summer of 1992, as I prepared to go out, Serb forces were rampaging through eastern and northern Bosnia, mass raping, killing, often with horrific brutality, and herding tens of thousands of Muslim men into concentration camps, where sadistic torture and large-scale killing were commonplace. Reports of mass killings were beginning to filter in and appear in the press. But nobody had yet used the term genocide or invoked the holocaust-like analogies that later appeared in some reports.

Q: Okay. That's Bosnia. What about Croatia at that time? And by the way, you had people in high places in Washington who knew Yugoslavia well, who must have been following...

NEITZKE: Well, let's back up. June 1991. The forces of disintegration were already well advanced in Yugoslavia. Secretary Baker, with Eagleburger I believe, arrived in Belgrade for, some would argue, a hopelessly belated, last ditch effort to head off secession and the violence that would likely accompany it. In his one-day visit Baker met with federal officials and, as I understand it, separately and seriatim - moving room to room - with the leaders of the various republics, strongly urging them to resolve their differences peaceably and keep the country together. It's clear in retrospect, and some would say it was pretty clear at the time, the secession train had already left the station. But Baker is said to have been shocked and angered, reacting almost in a fit of pique I was told, when, within days of his visit, the Slovenes and Croats moved toward independence. The question here is whether his visit - coming so late and with the message he delivered - at least the message Milosevic appears to have heard - may have done more harm than good, whether it signaled to Milosevic that we so wanted Yugoslavia held together that we'd tolerate his use of military force to that end.

Belgrade did allow the Slovenes to break free after a 10-day mini-war. But when Croatia attempted to follow suit, it quickly became clear that this would be a whole different affair, that Milosevic, the JNA, and emerging Croatian Serb paramilitaries would employ any means necessary to prevent majority Serb areas - very liberally defined - from being incorporated into a new, as they saw it, Ustashe state. They had been organizing and arming Serb militias in Croatia for a long time before that. A no holds barred Serbian land grab quickly got underway. That's when reports of widespread shelling of towns and cities, destruction of churches and cultural monuments, summary executions, tens of thousands of displaced persons, and general barbarity began appearing in the press. They picked up in intensity as the fall wore on. Most reports blamed Serbian forces for the vast majority of the excesses and portrayed the Croats, scrambling to assemble makeshift defenses, as struggling against the odds to hold on to what they could.

Q: Well, would you say that was accurate, was it that one-sided, in Croatia, do you think?

NEITZKE: Yes and no. The amount of carnage inflicted by Serbian forces was incomparably greater. The Serbs' execution of some 200 patients from the Vukovar Hospital, while reducing that once attractive city to rubble, for example, was shocking, as was, in a different way, their gratuitous shelling of Split and especially Dubrovnik. The Croats did nothing to match that. What I later learned, however, in documentary evidence that came to my attention and that I passed to the War Crimes Tribunal, is that there had been a number of smaller-scale Croatian provocations and other actions directed against Serbian communities, especially early in the fighting. Although they didn't appear to have been ordered by Zagreb, some seemed deliberately aimed at provoking Serbian responses.

So when Eagleburger told his foreign interlocutors that the Croats too were behaving badly, he wasn't lying, but the impression conveyed would have been misleading, given the disparity in crimes committed by the two sides on the ground. This practice of equating the so-called "conflicting parties" was almost seamlessly carried over to the Bosnia conflict; in time it became Warren Christopher's line as well. Eagleburger appeared on news programs frequently, declaring that there were no heroes in the former Yugoslavia, that the Croats too were feeding the conflict, and that there just wasn't much the U.S. could do until "these people tire of killing one another." I believe those were his exact words. That line was intended to buttress support for our hands-off policy, both in the Croatian War and in Bosnia. In the wake of our Gulf War victory, we were happy to accede to the Europeans insistence that they handle this problem in "their own back yard." But beginning in late 1991 and carrying over into 1992, there was a row within the Western Alliance over whether and when to recognize Croatian and Slovene independence. Some felt, including many in Washington, that Germany especially was trying to force the pace...

Q: It was Genscher. He was the German Foreign Minister and head of the FDP, I think. Many people considered him the guy who pulled the plug by recognizing...

NEITZKE: Rushing the recognition.

Q: Rushing the recognition. You know, as an old Serbian hand I have to say that from the Serb perspective to have the Germans lead off in recognizing Croatia, followed shortly thereafter I think by the Vatican, the Pope, I mean these are the two powers that did such a beastly job to the Serbs during World War II, I cannot think of a worse combination.

NEITZKE: The Vatican acted beastly toward the Serbs during World War II? That's what we all learned in Belgrade, isn't it. But I've researched that issue in some detail, and I don't think that characterization is accurate. Yes, some Croatian Franciscans acted more like Fascists than priests and they have a lot to answer for. And Cardinal Stepinac should have done more to distance the Church from the Ustashe regime, although it's not clear he'd have survived such an effort. But to imply that he, let alone the Pope, was complicit in Ustashe crimes, if that's what you're implying, I don't think is supported by the facts. I agree that the Germans and the Italians were complicit, however, and that a German-led recognition effort of a Tudjman-led breakaway Croatian Government in late 1991 would not have gone down well among Serbs with a long memory.

But the argument that hasty German-led recognition of Croatia and Slovenia is what led to the worst of what happened in the former Yugoslavia is just wrong. When the EC announced its decision in December 1991 to recognize Croatia and Slovenia - yes, with a strong push by Genscher - Washington objected, arguing that recognition was premature. In a huff, we withheld our own recognition of Croatia and Slovenia for four months, until Bosnia, for which we had much more sympathy - but little more than sympathy, as it turned out - could be included. But given where things stood in Croatia in December 1991, I find the charge that Germany heightened the level of violence by forcing the pace of recognition baseless. There is simply no way, in December 1991, with all the killing and destruction, done vastly disproportionately by the JNA and other Serbian forces, that Croatia would have returned, or could have been forced to return, to the Yugoslav fold, such as it was. EC recognition of Zagreb was the first substantial, unambiguous Western signal to Milosevic that he was not going to get away with it; that the game of holding Yugoslavia together, or carving out a Greater Serbia, at whatever bloody cost he deemed necessary was not going to succeed. The lesson would have been driven home much more effectively if the U.S. had joined the EC in recognizing Croatia at that point, rather than lamenting the EC's move.

A far better question regarding the consequences of premature recognition has to do with Bosnia, and whether our rushing that recognition was prudent. Washington calculated that immediate recognition of Bosnia, in early April 1992, was our best hope of deterring Milosevic and Karadzic. But Sarajevo was a very fragile government-in-formation at that time, utterly unable to defend itself against the onslaught that the Serbs had promised - remember Karadzic's infamous speech - if Bosnia's Muslims voted for independence. I would grant, however, that in the end it may not have mattered that much, since the Bosnian Serbs, with Belgrade's strong backing, were already intent on seizing as much of Bosnia as they could, had been deep into operational planning for months, and had begun "cleansing" operations in northeastern Bosnia as early as late February and early March of 1992.

Q: Yes. But just to get back to Croatia at...

NEITZKE: In Croatia, a tenuous ceasefire had finally been arranged in January 1992 under Cy Vance's auspices - working for the UN - the umpteenth, 15th ceasefire I believe, but this one held, more or less. It left part of Eastern Slavonia, part of Western Slavonia, and the Krajina under the control of Serbian militias armed and supplied by Belgrade. These became the four so-called UN Protected Areas, or UNPAs, also known as Sectors East, West, North, and South. The JNA had long since withdrawn from Zagreb and its immediate environs, so there was an uneasy sense of calm there. But the whole place was becoming inundated with displaced Croats and then later with Bosnian refugees.

Q: Well, getting back to how closely Washington was following all this, you had people in high places, besides Larry Eagleburger, who knew Yugoslavia well.

NEITZKE: That's right. After all, this was a country that the U.S. had more or less obsessed on for the forty-three years since Tito's break with Moscow, a country in which a number of top FSOs had served, a country we had expended enormous effort to penetrate, a country we felt we knew as well as any outsider could know it. And in Washington, as I was preparing to go out, you had this convergence of Yugo experts near the top of our government. Eagleburger was then Deputy Secretary of State, soon to be Acting Secretary, when Baker left to manage Bush's Presidential campaign. There was National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Eagleburger's ex-colleague from his early 1960s Belgrade days, and EUR Assistant Secretary Tom Niles, another ex-Yugo hand, Eagleburger's top aide, as well as others around State. Whatever their strategic analysis regarding the prudence of U.S. engagement, this group appears to have been fundamentally unable to look at what had become of their beloved Yugoslavia with anything close to objective detachment. Eagleburger would occasionally invoke the history of U.S.-Serbian relations in almost reverential tones. This is what made so strained, and strange, our official professed ignorance of what was going on in Bosnia in the summer of 1992, when the mass atrocity stories began appearing in the press, and video of skeletal humans in Serb-run concentration camps began appearing on TV screens around the world; Washington, the State Department, tried to maintain that it just didn't know that much about what was happening.

That contention was farcical. Admittedly, with the Soviet Union's peaceful disintegration, Yugoslavia's strategic importance to us fell precipitously. And with the Gulf War victory under their belt, and a Presidential election looming, Bush and Baker wished at all costs to avoid what they saw as a potentially much more difficult intervention in the Balkans. So it's virtually certain that we didn't deploy the full panoply of U.S. intelligence assets to ascertain the ground truth during the height of the Bosnian bloodbath; that would clearly not have served our policy objectives. But their claim to be largely ignorant of what was happening in Bosnia amid the Serbs' genocidal rampage rang particularly hollow. I recall one congressional hearing in which Tom Lantos, a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and a Holocaust survivor, nearly screamed his disbelief and indignation at Assistant Secretary Niles' feeble efforts to suggest we couldn't confirm the existence of what the press were then calling Serb-run death camps. We now know that the Administration was not as ignorant as it claimed to be; there was contemporaneous satellite imagery that could have helped confirm the early reports of death camps.

That's all by way of background as to what was going on as I was heading out to Zagreb, although at that point I myself was ignorant of a lot of this. I had been reading all I could, monitoring the cable traffic, talking to a lot of people. I was trying to get a grip on which Washington players felt how strongly about what aspects of the situation, and where everyone saw things going. And I was getting up to speed on the status and future plans for the Consulate General in Zagreb. But nowhere, except to some extent on the Hill, did I get a strong, clear indication that monitoring, reporting on, analyzing, ferreting out information about "ethnic cleansing" or mass killing in the former Yugoslavia was of major interest or policy concern to the U.S. Government. It just wasn't there.

Q: The Croats have always had a much more influential presence in the U.S., particularly in places like Chicago and Cleveland. Also there is a very strong tie to the Catholic Church. Correct me if I am over showing my five years in Belgrade, but the Catholic Church was very strongly identified with Croatian nationalism. I mean, you put these two together and you have a powerful public affairs apparatus in the U.S. and other places. Rightly or wrongly, did you find this to be the case?

NEITZKE: That begs a couple questions. First, comparing the influence of the Catholic Church on Croatian nationalism with the importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church to Serbian nationalism, I'd have to say, having lived in both places, that the Serbian Orthodox Church is the more closely identified with purely nationalist elements. It was not the Orthodox Church in Serbia, after all, it was the Serbian Orthodox Church, the explicitly national variant of the Orthodox faith. In Serbia the Church was more intimately bound up with the development of Serbian nationhood, with its re-emergence after centuries of Ottoman rule, and with the very self-conception of the people, than was the case with the Catholic Church in Croatia, or in most Catholic countries for that matter. I'm not saying that Catholicism was unimportant to Croatian nationalists, clearly it was. I remember a crowd of some half million or so Croats, including nearly everyone in the Government, at an outdoor mass during the Pope's visit to Zagreb in September 1994. Although the Pope kept the focus on religion, there was no question about the overriding religious affiliation of this nation. And you could go back to the World War II Pavelic regime in Croatia which tried, with very uneven success, to enfold the Church into efforts to gin up national feeling and support. But it has never been the Croatian Catholic Church, or the Hungarian Catholic Church, or the Spanish Catholic Church, it was the universal Catholic Church in Croatia. That's an important distinction, which was also underlined, I might add, during the Pope's visit.

Regarding the comparative influence wielded by the Croatian diaspora, my recollection is that the Serbian-American community exercised far greater influence. If you go back to the decades preceding Yugoslavia's breakup, however, then yes, Croatian expat communities, although perhaps more those in Canada and Australia than in the U.S., exerted more influence. But in the early days of Yugoslavia's breakup, Serbian-Americans and their backers here were very effective in blunting efforts to get the USG more involved. Serbian-American Congresswoman Helen Bentley, for example, was quite outspoken. And it seemed, throughout the first year or two of the Bosnian conflict, that whenever reports would surface of egregious Serbian actions, CNN - and you recall how dominant CNN was at that time - would trot out this "analyst," a Serbian-American apologist, to try to blunt the reaction, and she was quite good at it for a long while.

And, while we're on the subject of expat influence, there was the Serb expat-sponsored speaking tour for the unabashedly Serbo-philic ex-UNPROFOR Canadian General Lewis MacKenzie. There was the six-month-long spectacle of Serbian-American businessman Milan Panic, evidently with the State Department's blessing, serving as Prime Minister in Belgrade, lending a veneer of semi-respectability to the Serbian cause during one of the bloodiest periods in Bosnia. And there were reports later on that Serbian-Americans, or Serbian Permanent Residents in the U.S., were closely advising Karadzic and his Bosnian Serb cronies on how to deal with Washington, to keep us out of the conflict.

So no, emphatically no, I don't think Croatian-Americans out-influenced their Serbian-American counterparts. But the Croatian-American community was a source of funding and some personnel, as were even more so the Croatian communities in Canada and Australia, for the new breakaway government in Zagreb.

Q: Well, what about that, the formation of the Croatian military, the army? How did that come about? Did the expats play much of a role in that?

NEITZKE: Again, a little context. When the country was on the brink of breaking up, in the summer of 1991, there were JNA facilities, bases, arms depots and so forth around Zagreb and elsewhere in the then Croatian Republic. The JNA was at that point essentially a Serbian institution. To a lesser extent, it always had been. That arose partly from Belgrade's de facto dominance of the country of Yugoslavia but also from the more, let's say Spartan-like culture of the Serbian people, at least historically, and the fact that they had defended the South Slavs disproportionately even before Yugoslavia came into being, in helping to liberate the Balkans from the fading Ottomans, in the various Balkan Wars, and in World War I. The Serbs had basically provided a military framework, a credible defense, for a post-World War I South Slav state in which the comparatively less militaristic Slovenes and Croats could shelter. A slight exaggeration perhaps, but not much. Tito tried to balance things in nationality terms, and all Yugoslavs had to do their required military service, but the JNA officer corps was always disproportionately Serbian. Again, Tudjman and many other non-Serbs rose through the ranks to distinguished military careers, and the senior officer corps did not have a Serbs-Only stamp on it. As tensions rose in Yugoslavia, however, paralleling Milosevic's rise from the late 1980s on, the JNA assumed an increasingly Serbian cast. When Slovenia and then Croatia attempted to break away, there was no question where JNA sympathies lay, whom they would fight for, and, sensing that, non-Serb officers and troops had been defecting.

Defense forces in Croatia were a pretty ad hoc affair early in the fighting. Those with JNA experience, especially officers, were much in demand, as was anyone who could facilitate the acquisition of arms, through the international black market or anywhere else. And the expats played a role in that, both funding and acquiring arms. Most of this emerging Croatian force was home grown. They got a lot of recruits from the historically most militaristic segment of the Croatian people, the Hercegovinians. They also recruited from expat communities abroad. Some elements of this emerging Croatian defense effort, however, employed methods that were beyond the pale from the outset. I'm speaking here of HOS, the military arm, I believe, of Dobroslav Paraga's Party of Rights, whose actions often constituted, or bordered on, war crimes. As Croatia gradually rose to its feet, and the HVO became its formal military force, HOS and lesser, similar elements were marginalized, with remnants of HOS eventually incorporated into the HVO. But, yes, getting back to your question, expats were very important to the Croatian defense effort.

Q: Well then, you got out there when, and what was it like when you arrived?

NEITZKE: I went out in July of '92, a bit early. This is generally not done, but because of the staffing situation in Zagreb - it was a skeleton crew to begin with and almost all of them would be departing soon - I wanted some overlap with my predecessor, Mike Einik.

I recall landing in Zagreb with my wife and children on a nearly empty Croatian Airlines flight from Frankfurt, on one of the three or so planes they then had in their new fleet. The military situation was still sufficiently tenuous that very few other airlines were flying into Zagreb. The airport was eerily quiet, virtually deserted. Zagreb itself looked more or less normal at first glance, although it was already home to tens of thousands of displaced Croats and Bosnian refugees, housed in camps and various public buildings in and around the city.

I spent a week with Einik, learning as much as I could about ConGen operational and staffing issues and combining some of his farewell calls with my introductory calls. Washington had recognized Croatia and Slovenia in April but had held off on establishing diplomatic relations with either, so for the moment I also covered Slovenia and did a round of calls with Einik in Ljubljana as well. It turned out that that would be the only time I ever dealt with Slovenia.

Q: What was the relationship like at this point between the Consulate General and our Embassy in Belgrade? Or was there any relationship at all?

NEITZKE: Warren Zimmerman, our Ambassador, had been withdrawn from Belgrade in early May 1992 to protest Serbian actions in Bosnia. The Charge was Bob Rackmales. Though operationally cut off from Belgrade - to travel between the posts one had to take a long, circuitous route through Hungary - we were nonetheless still technically subordinate to them. Contact between us was limited: the odd phone call, info copies of each others' cables, an occasional TDY-er traveling up from Belgrade to help out. We were, in effect, on our own, but as a ConGen still lacked certain authorities. The only friction in this several week period was over which of us should get the additional reporting officers the Department was considering sending out in response to pressures to get more reporting on Bosnia.

Q: I do not quite understand. I realize this is sort of an amorphous thing, but there you were in Croatia, and things were happening in Bosnia, and you are suggesting there was doubt about who should cover that. What exactly was your responsibility for Bosnia?

NEITZKE: Fair question. Let's address that now, then, because, as you'll see, much of my time and energy in Croatia was in fact devoted to Bosnia. But I'll need to digress for just a minute and recall the old days - I think we talked about this much earlier, regarding my Belgrade tour in the mid-1970s - before Yugoslavia's disintegration. Embassy Belgrade then covered Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia itself and Bosnia for the purpose of political and economic reporting, consular services, and so forth. The ConGen in Zagreb covered Croatia and Slovenia. The lines were clearly drawn; Belgrade covered Bosnia.

As the situation in Bosnia rapidly deteriorated in the spring of 1992, however, the Embassy began severely restricting official travel into the area, so much so that nearly all Belgrade reporting on what was happening in Bosnia from the spring of 1992 onward resulted from sporadic phone calls to Bosnian contacts or debriefings of UN, other international, or NGO aid workers returning from the area. By the time I arrived in Zagreb, even that reporting had slowed, as the balance of useful Bosnian reporting contacts had swung heavily in our direction. UNPROFOR had moved its headquarters to Zagreb after the Serbian siege of Sarajevo made it problematic to remain there and after a brief, abortive attempt to set up shop in Belgrade, of all places. UNHCR's Special Representative for the Former Yugoslavia was headquartered in Zagreb, out of which they ran the largest part of a growing Bosnian relief operation. A rapidly growing number of aid organizations were also doing most of their runs into Bosnia from Croatia. Nearly all air access to Sarajevo - under UN auspices - was out of Zagreb. And, at any given time, half of the Bosnian government was in Zagreb, as Croatia temporarily became home to hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslim refugees.

Yet amid this incredibly rich reporting environment, especially compared to Belgrade at that time, Zagreb had only a couple full-time reporting officers. Even so, Embassy Belgrade was extremely reluctant to surrender its prerogative, either its right to render the definitive field judgment on what was happening in Bosnia, or even to acknowledge that our comparative reporting potentials regarding Bosnia had changed dramatically. We were asking for more reporting officers and Rackmales was insisting that whatever additional staff were sent out should go to Belgrade. But, as I mentioned, that situation was short-lived. Within weeks of my arrival, we announced our intention to establish full diplomatic relations with Zagreb - and Ljubljana - and to establish an Embassy, which we did in late August of 1992. Our subsequent contact with Embassy Belgrade was minimal, although tensions arose, fairly sharp, open disagreements in a few cases, once we then began ratcheting up our own reporting and analysis on what was happening in Bosnia.

Q: But what about Slovenia? You weren't ever going to be dually accredited, or were you?

NEITZKE: No. As I said, I had only one, introductory round of meetings with government leaders in Ljubljana. Once diplomatic relations were announced, Washington handled Slovenia directly; we weren't involved, except to render occasional TDY assistance to our Embassy there.

Q: Did we have anything there to build upon?

NEITZKE: We had a USIS (United States Information Services) reading room there. This was a holdover from, well, from way back. In the old days we had covered Yugoslavia not just from Belgrade and Zagreb but with reading rooms, small libraries, American centers in all of the republic capitals, terrific bang for the buck investments. So that USIS facility in Ljubljana was the nub of what would become a small American Embassy.

Q: Well, when you got to Zagreb, how good would you say the Consul General's relationships were with the Croatian Government?

NEITZKE: Einik was personally respected around town. Since he represented the United States, he had to be taken seriously. But up until Zimmerman's departure in May 1992, he, Zimmermann, was the senior American official in the country. Zimmerman had visited Zagreb a number of times and both he and Einik had made clear to everyone that America wasn't coming to Croatia's defense; they were on their own as far as we were concerned. So there was a somewhat stiff formality to the relationship, because in Einik's last year there these people had at times been in a nearly life and death struggle from which we were standing aside. And Tudjman had a pretty good idea how he personally, and Croatia's cause, were regarded in Washington. Still, and notwithstanding all the Germans were doing for them, the U.S. was the Western power they most looked to, they wanted to be close to, whose long-term support they needed most. So they were generally friendly and solicitous.

Q: What was your impression of how the Europeans, their Ambassadors by that time, I suppose, were regarded? And how did they treat you?

NEITZKE: Having taken the lead in the EC's recognition of Croatia in early 1992, the Germans were obviously popular in Zagreb. But even the Germans didn't have that large an Embassy, and most of the other European embassies were very small. The Croatian Government treated them all with the utmost courtesy; they were at pains to get the diplomatic formalities correct, to be seen as a real, functioning government. Most of the Western Ambassadors struck me as competent, astute observers, not overly sympathetic to the Croats but not exhibiting the trained-in-Belgrade perspective either, although several of them had, as I had, served earlier in Belgrade. I had a lot of contact with them, especially in that first year, and came to regard a number of them as friends as well as colleagues. And they tended to search me out for information that they weren't getting, or for my assessment of this or that, which partly reflected, I'm sure, the disproportionate amount of contact that I had with Tudjman and other senior officials. In fact, recognition of our, let's say, comparative advantage in knowing what was going on only grew with time. But it was a good group of Ambassadors, all in all, and, my title notwithstanding, they dealt freely and often with me as a peer.

Q: Well, how did you find Tudjman at first?

NEITZKE: In my initial conversation with him, one of the first things he said to me was, in essence, I'm sure you must have heard a lot of bad things about me in the halls of the State Department. He was half grinning, but only half. Of course, I said he was mistaken, but we both knew where things stood. In fact, his Defense Minister, ex-Canadian businessman Gojko Susak, whom I met early on and had frequent dealings with, used to recount how, in one early meeting at the State Department, he had been shouted at by an irate, finger-waving, senior official, swearing that only over Washington's dead body would Croatia ever become independent.

In personal terms, Tudjman didn't fit the image of him that I'd gained in Washington. That image was based heavily on Zimmerman's read of Tudjman from their several meetings. Warren described Tudjman not only as an ardent nationalist, which he was, but as an almost buffoon - like character, temperamental, humorless, racist toward Serbs, probably anti-Semitic, given to pomposity, and often poorly briefed. Although I could see a couple traits in Tudjman that may have given rise to some of that, and Warren's read may have better captured Tudjman earlier, in Croatia's pre-independence phase, it was not an accurate depiction of the Franjo Tudjman I got to know during dozens of encounters. I spent a lot of time with him, making demarches, escorting delegations to meetings and dinners with him, or being pulled aside to speak with him at events he would host. It wasn't me per se; there was no question he placed the United States in a special category and wanted our respect.

Tudjman, as I said, was an ex-communist general, a historian of sorts, a Croatian nationalist to the core, 70 years old when I first met him. He could be prickly, he could be overly blunt, but more often he was charming. Above all, however, he could be worked, or, as Thatcher once famously said of Gorbachev, you could do business with him. I know what his critics say, the accusations of Holocaust revisionism - his underestimations of Serbian and Jewish victims, of the total killings at Jasenovac, and so on. And there is cause for concern there, though, from what I've read, not as much cause as his harshest critics allege. And as for his supposed anti-Semitism, yes, I know about the remark concerning his wife's not being Jewish, although most of his critics quote that one way out of context. But I never saw it or heard it from Tudjman, anti-Semitism, even in credible anecdotal form, and one heard all kinds of rumors about the man and his past when I was there.

I recall a meeting I later had with the Agency's bio folks who were taken aback by my insistence that Warren, and consequently they, had gotten Tudjman wrong, had substantially underestimated him. I'm not saying Tudjman didn't have serious flaws; clearly he did, including his conception of democracy and his view of Croatia as mainly for the Croats, as though Croatia's Serbs ought to content themselves with second-class status. I know from Croatian-Serb friends and contacts something of what it felt like to be a Serb in Tudjman's Croatia. Apart from the Krajina and other areas of active, early conflict, it wasn't so much a fear of physical harm - although there was some of that -as an acute anxiety about jobs, opportunities, and social standing, areas in which some Croatian Serbs faced active discrimination or worse, again, especially early on. And Tudjman could be exceptionally thin skinned, especially when mocked or ridiculed in the press, for example in numerous, biting, but often hilarious photomontages in Feral Tribune. I recall intervening in one such case, urging him just to take it, as the necessary cost of a free press in a budding democracy. I'm not sure how much progress we ever made on that front, though.

Q: We know Milosevic was playing the nationalist card, playing up hatred in order to gain his objectives. How about Tudjman? Were these two guys playing the same game or was Tudjman a different type?

NEITZKE: It always amazed me that Warren and others seemed to cut Milosevic, a pathologically duplicitous, first-order war criminal, so much more slack, at least on a personal basis, than they did Tudjman. Was it because Milosevic sometimes behaved better in person than Tudjman did? I've heard that people who met with Milosevic often came away with the image of a polished sort of Western business type, and that he spoke decent English. Tudjman's English, on the other hand, could be halting, and he preferred to use an interpreter when conducting serious business. Yet Milosevic calmly, methodically went about trying to realize his dream of Greater Serbia through sheer butchery, mass rape, and mass murder, whereas Tudjman did not, and personally was far more reactive. Tudjman may once have dreamed of hiving off at least the Croatian inhabited parts of Bosnia. We all heard the rumors - never substantiated, as far as I know - about a pre-war deal struck with Milosevic at Karadjordjevo to divide Bosnia between them. But by 1992 Tudjman had his hands more than full with devastation and Serb occupation in Croatia and concern for the very survival of some Croat-dominant communities in Bosnia. The contrast with Milosevic could hardly have been sharper. For all of Warren's concern for the plight of Serbs in Tudjman's new Croatia - and, as I indicated, on the whole I shared those concerns - he showed precious little understanding of why so many average Croats might not have wished to remain in Milosevic's Yugoslavia. And on that score, I think, unfortunately, Warren accurately reflected the studied biases of Washington's other senior Yugo hands.

I recall another, later meeting I had at the Agency with a couple of fairly senior people. When I expressed frustration about why they were continuing to get it wrong in terms of the balance of who had done what to whom in Bosnia, one of them bluntly said to me, we've known all along who the bad guys were, but we were not about to "help make Yugoslavia ripe for Croatian hegemony." I couldn't believe it. Was this 1943 or 1993? Croatia was then more or less on its back, sheltering hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and Bosnian refugees while Serb forces continued to run amok. And here was the Agency couching its analysis to fit, what, their own badly dated biases. So, no, Tudjman and Milosevic were not actually playing the same game. And I said so, openly and clearly, in a number of cables.

Q: Back to the handoff in Zagreb, what advice did your predecessor give you, how did he see your priorities?

NEITZKE: Einik basically said, intending no offense, that I'd been handed a job that couldn't be done. I soon came to understand what he meant. When I arrived the ConGen had five or so seasoned officers, nearly all of whom were set to depart soon and were anxious to leave. The local staff was stressed out from the war and lingering ethnic tensions within the ConGen. The old, rickety, but beautifully situated ConGen building was essentially unsecured, other than with basic locks and keys. It had been abandoned altogether when everyone left Zagreb amid the JNA bombing raid the previous autumn. In its day to day operations, the ConGen had not yet returned even to the tempo of the pre-war days; they did some reporting but were essentially in a holding pattern pending an uncertain future.

Regarding Mike's counsel on priorities, most of that too had to do with ConGen operational issues, managing some difficult personnel problems, things of that sort. The mindset was still one of subordination to Belgrade, with Belgrade having the call on virtually all things Bosnian. Reporting on the burgeoning Bosnian refugee situation in Croatia, including in and around Zagreb, let alone systematically tapping into those refugees, learning what they had experienced in Bosnia, did not appear to be a high priority. What I later found troubling was that in the weeks prior to my arrival, when some of the worst of the Bosnian horrors were taking place, the Bosnian Government had held conferences in Zagreb through which they were trying desperately to alert the international community to the breadth of what was happening in Bosnia, providing data on reported killings, rapes, ethnic cleansing, and so on. One could, of course, dispute the accuracy of what any Bosnians might have been putting out at that point, given their desperation. But, as best I could tell, and I looked into this, these early Bosnian Government pleas for help in Zagreb were not reported on, at least not at any length. That would, of course, have comported with both Washington's limited interest and the Embassy Belgrade-ConGen Zagreb jurisdictional understanding regarding Bosnia.

There was something else about that, too, about why there seemed to have been so little reporting on a security and humanitarian situation that was, not very far from Zagreb, precarious. I don't want to overstate this, but these guys had been alone for six or seven months, their families evacuated. Some of the families had just returned in May. I sensed a reluctance to, let's say, over dramatize the security situation lest the families' hard-won return prove short-lived. This isn't something unique to that war or that post; no one wants to see families jerked around. And I benefited from this as well, being able to take my own family to post in a situation in which, by some measures, that might not have been warranted.

But getting back to the handover, I think Mike perceived, as did I, that nearly everything in the ConGen's small, comparatively ordered world was about to change.

Q: Did you feel that you were on a tight leash from Washington?

NEITZKE: Not really. As I indicated, our policy toward the Yugo mess in the early summer of 1992 lay just to the active side of indifference. It's not our problem. We're not going to let it become our problem. We'll help out where we can, mainly on the humanitarian relief side, without becoming entangled in the conflicts. We'll participate in diplomatic initiatives aimed at halting the violence, but we're not about to get out front. Those were our basic objectives. And, of course, keep an eye on Tudjman and the Croats, and try, as best we could, to urge things along in a democratic direction. There was no specific charge to me as far as reporting was concerned. On that score, frankly, I don't think they expected much. I'd have a tiny staff, most of whom would be new to the area, one communicator. And again, at that time, the ConGen was still technically subordinate to Belgrade.

Q: Well, what did you set out to do, to change? What did you set as your priorities at first?

NEITZKE: There wasn't much time for formal strategizing, setting goals and objectives and all that. I don't recall having much discretionary time at all in those early days. It was more a blur of events, meetings, other obligations. But out of that initial blur of activities, I did in fact frame a game plan for myself and the mission. The first such activity began about three hours after Einik and his family departed, when I welcomed my first CODEL, John Murtha.

Q: Representative from Pennsylvania.

NEITZKE: Yes. House Defense Appropriations heavyweight. But he was only the first of an onslaught of Congressmen, Senators, Congressional staffers, senior U.S. military, aid groups, and assorted other official delegations that descended on us during that first year. A fifth or more of the U.S. Senate came out, for example, most of whom I had the opportunity to speak with at length. We had on average a new official delegation arriving every six days or so that first year, in addition to swarms of journalists, NGO representatives, and third country diplomats requesting briefings. Although the mission was growing rapidly - mainly by adding TDYers - we were still comparatively small, with limited personnel, office space, vehicles, and so forth. Many of these visitors required tending from wheels down to wheels up, and the largest of them, the six Senators who attended our formal Embassy opening, for example, required my full-time attention. So it was a hectic pace, we were stretched thin, but it was exhilarating too. And early on, in part because of some of these visitors, I got up to speed on what was really happening in Bosnia more quickly than I probably would have been able to otherwise.

But back to Murtha. He came out because he, like many others on the Hill and in the Administration, felt pressure from the increased press reporting on events in Bosnia and was concerned that this could lead to calls for U.S. military intervention. There was a test of wills building in Washington and in other Western capitals not only over whether the reports were accurate but also over whether there was anything we could or should do even if they were accurate. The first place I took Murtha was a converted gymnasium in central Zagreb, one of many places the Croats were sheltering Bosnian refugees.

Q: Well, what was your impression of them, of the refugees?

NEITZKE: Washington Post correspondent Peter Maass said in his Bosnia book, "Love Thy Neighbor," that what first strikes you on encountering a large refugee population hastily settled in a confined space is the overpowering smell. You feel ashamed to notice it, but it's there, it's striking. The people, each family limited to a few square yards of space on the gym floor, looked grim, sad, hopeless. Yet most of these people were, in a sense, lucky, having avoided becoming ensnared in the Serb-run network of concentration camps - starvation, torture, rape, and murder camps, in effect. These people had at least escaped that.

Murtha walked around with an interpreter and spoke to various people, trying to get a sense of what was really going on in Bosnia. What he heard, partly because many had escaped early and partly because of the difficulty of getting much detail out of traumatized people in a brief encounter, was mostly indirect evidence. He didn't get the kind of shocking, graphic accounts that I would soon be exposed to, credible, eye-witness testimony of public rapes and mass murder. Murtha did not get that. What he heard was more nuanced, or second-hand. Murtha would have been justified in coming away from that and saying, well, you know, it's bad but it's on the understandable side of the spectrum of what happens in all wars.

I'm not sure whether I took Murtha over to UNPROFOR, commanded at that time by an overwhelmed but very professional and likable Indian General named Satish Nambiar. I took many CODELs for UNPROFOR briefings, however, and UNPROFOR's unwavering line was, in essence, they're all bastards, the Serbs, the Croats, and even the Muslims; the international community handed us too few people for an undoable task in a situation that would only be made worse by Western military intervention. What I came to sense after a few of these briefings, comparing what I heard UNPROFOR say with what I knew from other sources was going on in Bosnia, is that something akin to Stockholm Syndrome was setting in at UNPROFOR, especially among their forces in Serbian-besieged Sarajevo.

Q: Any other early impressions, others who helped shape your, I mean, you mentioned...

NEITZKE: Just after Murtha departed two articles by Roy Gutman appeared in Newsday. Roy, as you may know, won the Pulitzer Prize for his early reports on the Bosnian genocide. His pieces were notable for their eye-witness accounts of death camps and for his straightforward use of Holocaust imagery. He had already written a less-noticed piece with Auschwitz in the title, about how Serbs were packing Muslims, including women and children, into cattle and freight cars, without food or water, and shipping them off to unknown destinations. But these two pieces, in very early August 1992, had an explosive impact in Washington, as did, shortly thereafter, the first televised footage of camps showing throngs of emaciated men, some looking almost skeletal, behind barb-wire fences. According to Department officers who personally witnessed this, even Eagleburger's office was in close to full-blown panic, fearing that these reports might force the Administration's hand on intervention. So when the Department spokesman appeared the next day to confirm Gutman's allegations of death camps, Eagleburger's office had EUR Assistant Secretary Niles publicly walk it back, denying the Administration had any confirmatory evidence of death camps, in the heated exchange with Representative Lantos that I referred to earlier.

The day after Gutman's pieces appeared, he called on me in Zagreb. We spoke for a long time. He told me more of what he'd heard about the camps. He was quietly incensed that the U.S. Government wasn't sounding the alarm. He was convinced that we must have satellite imagery that could help confirm the existence of the camps. He said a colleague of his had raised this matter directly with Secretary Baker. I could do little more than listen at that point. I did not have independent evidence to confirm the nature of the camps; nor was I yet aware that imagery did in fact exist to buttress his claims. Nor did I yet have Gutman's confidence, but that meeting proved to be the beginning of a long and useful association.

Then, within a day or two, if I recall correctly, Peter Galbraith arrived, a STAFFDEL of one from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. That too was the beginning of a long association, as you know. Unbeknownst to either of us, Peter would become Ambassador in Zagreb a year later and I'd stay on for two years as DCM. Peter had done acclaimed investigative work for the SFRC on Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Iraqi Kurds.

Q: What was your first impression? I mean, you two would end up spending a lot of time together. How did he strike you?

NEITZKE: No lack of self-confidence, and a tinge of early Charlie Wilson. But also smart and determined to ferret out evidence of what he too had heard was happening in Bosnia. It took a while for us to get on the same wavelength, but eventually we did, pretty much. On that first trip - he came back a couple times, I think - I accompanied him on most of his calls and on a trip out of town that we'd arranged. A few of these may be worth including.

Q: Okay.

NEITZKE: First, our call at UNHCR revealed the strain and suspicion already taking hold of that organization. These were the people, the only outsiders early on, who had witnessed some of the worst of the worst in Bosnia. At the senior working level, they were clearly afraid that Western military intervention, if it came, would worsen the humanitarian situation and make it impossible for them to do their jobs - essentially helping care for refugees and delivering food to embattled communities. So they were loath to sound alarm bells about mass murder or death camps. Later, when the full dimensions of the genocide became clear, some at UNHCR backtracked, claiming that they had duly reported what they saw all along but no one had paid attention. Journalists found that there had been some early UNHCR field reports, and that some had made their way, perhaps through USUN, to the State Department. But neither State nor UNHCR publicized them at the time. By the summer of 1992, UNHCR was already functioning in something of a twilight zone of horror. As the killing and "cleansing" in Bosnia generated some million and a half refugees, UNHCR had, in a sense, to blind themselves to the atrocities generating the refugee flows while attempting to feed as many victims-in-place as possible until many of those victims too became refugees.

When Peter and I met with the UNHCR's Tony Land in early August, the only alarm bell Land sounded was over the possibility of Western military intervention. Land was at pains to downplay the difficulties they faced and the atrocities they had witnessed. Two months later, however, their message had changed, as UNHCR Special Envoy Josï¿½-Maria Mendiluce - one of the most decent, impressive individuals I met during my three years there - told me over dinner, and soon thereafter publicized, his estimate that some 400,000 Bosnians were at risk of dying in the coming winter of starvation, disease, and exposure. With fresh UNPROFOR troops then deploying in Bosnia, the Security Council's command that relief be pushed through by "all means necessary" appeared initially to have welcome teeth in it.

Q: But we, I mean UNPROFOR, did not use all means necessary, did they?

NEITZKE: In retrospect, it's clear that we never expected them to. The U.S., the State Department mainly, threw a monkey wrench into the process early on by leaning heavily on UNHCR to establish its base for supplying the most endangered Muslim areas - areas in Eastern, Northeastern, and Northern Bosnia threatened with Serbian ethnic cleansing - in, of all places, Belgrade, from which UNHCR would have to run convoys entirely through Serb-controlled territory. I don't know what State's thinking was on that. Looking back, it seems almost pernicious. In any event, that was the genesis of another tragic farce. A persistent pattern quickly emerged whereby Serbian forces would endlessly harass relief convoys escorted by UN troops who, in the event, proved unwilling to use force.

Let me stop for a moment to note that there was one brief period in which force was used. That was shortly after the British UNPROFOR forces deployed in the fall of 1992. Heavily armored and well led, they actually fought their way into a couple towns, going right through Serbian forces. All that earned for them, however, was a panicked reprimand from the UN military command that if the Brits kept that up they'd quickly endanger many other, less able UNPROFOR forces. So even the Brits were compelled to settle into a timid approach to aid delivery, under which the Serbs would typically allow to pass what were in effect starvation rations to encircled Muslims. In return, the Serbs alternately ripped off the convoys on the spot or demanded and got blackmail aid, part of which was sold on the black market and part of which was delivered to heavily non-refugee Serb populations, sometimes in Serbia itself. Whenever senior UNHCR officials would approach the point of throwing up their arms and screaming "this has to stop, we cannot do this anymore," the international community would, in essence, force them to keep going. At all costs, the pretense had to be maintained. A high-profile relief effort to which we could point, and contribute, had become a vital part of our limited engagement policy. We were, in effect, feeding Bosnia to death.

But getting back to my calls with Peter in August 1992, our stop at the ICRC's office in Zagreb was also interesting. Rather than express concern that the camps might be as brutal, and the atrocities as widespread, as was then being reported in the press, the ICRC Representative repeatedly challenged the credibility of Gutman's reports, suggesting that his witnesses had been coached. Strangely, Peter seemed to share her skepticism. A few days after that I was asked privately by Senator Carl Levin's office to vet one of Gutman's sources, whom the Senator wanted to bring to Washington to testify before a Senate Armed Services Subcommittee. We weren't ultimately able to say authoritatively whether the guy was legit, only that he sounded credible. So we helped him get on a plane to Washington. But getting back to the ICRC Rep, her attack on Gutman struck me, even then, as extraordinary. She was much less concerned about not having a firm grip on what was going on in Bosnia than about the embarrassment Gutman's and others' reporting was causing them. ICRC's hyper-defensiveness persisted as the conflict progressed.

Q: ICRC is supposed to be neutral, is it not, to do its job of aiding POWs and such?

NEITZKE: They try not to alienate any of the parties to a conflict, lest their access be compromised. And to be fair, they did some good work, doubtless saving many lives. The question was whether ICRC, if it had opted to push the limits, even within its traditional constraints, aggressively tried to gain entry into the camps earlier, might have saved many more lives. As it was, they were scrupulous about not apportioning blame, and they were not very pushy, especially at the height of the slaughter. But like UNHCR, if ICRC had not already existed, we'd have had to invent it. Because every time a mass atrocity report arose, a report that in the absence of ICRC might have compelled Washington and others to engage more directly, we hid behind ICRC, declaring that we'd urge ICRC to investigate, aware that ICRC's ability to do so was often extremely limited. In mid-August, for example, we sent Washington a detailed, albeit second-hand account of an animal slaughterhouse in northeastern Bosnia converted to the task of mechanized human killing. The Department's nervous response was to ask ICRC to look into it immediately. There was no reason to believe that ICRC could even get close to that area at that time and, as far as I know, they didn't.

Peter and I also visited UN Sector West, where we saw the mutual, Serb-Croat devastation of a formerly inter-ethnic town, mostly laid waste. And there, I'll never forget, we had this utterly weird sighting. The town lay virtually in ruins. The Orthodox church had been blasted, defaced, and desecrated and so had the Catholic church on the other end of town. And there was not a soul in sight, until, as though out of a Fellini film, this young boy emerged from behind a battered building and crossed the street in front of us. He stopped, turned briefly, and on the back of his tee shirt were the words, "shit happens," and he quickly disappeared into another shell pocked building. That was it; a perfect scene; so apt, as you stood there looking around and wondering what in god's name had gotten into these people.

Our visit to a Bosnian refugee camp in Eastern Slavonia, however, made the most lasting impression. There we were able to interview many eye-witnesses to atrocities, from whose graphic accounts Peter compiled the bulk of a report that the SFRC issued shortly after his return to Washington, adding to the accumulating evidence of genocide.

Q: Well normally in a case like this, particularly in a country that is relatively easy to get to and all, it is not like a Sudan or something, you would have the American and European press all over the place. This is the sort of situation that would excite a media person.

NEITZKE: There were journalists covering some of this in the late spring and early summer of 1992, but not yet in the numbers that we would later see. Several journalists had been killed covering the Croatian war, and moving around Bosnia once the killing started there was extremely dangerous. I'm not sure whether the press at that point had full access to the Bosnian refugee camps in Croatia. One could fly into Sarajevo on a UN flight to get the story of the tightening siege, the sniper killings, the shelling, the increasing hardships, the latest "bread line massacre." But journalists couldn't get near the death camps early on, not until late summer, when, under growing international pressure incited mainly by such press reporting as there had been up until then, the Serbs allowed a few journalists into a couple camps that they mistakenly thought had been sufficiently cleaned up to permit this. That's when you got that initial video of the emaciated prisoners milling about. That upped the number of journalists dramatically.

We finally managed to get an Embassy Zagreb officer, John Zerolis, into one camp, Manjaca, in early September on a CSCE fact-finding mission. He saw no evidence of executions, obviously, but reported seeing hundreds of desperate looking Muslim men and boys held in sort of pens in pig or cattle sheds and, for food, run through a slop line. He said most of them didn't look as though they were going to make it. Before these limited visits to certain camps, however, a journalist had to be pretty determined - as only Gutman, Ed Vulliamy and a few others were - to get credible details about what was happening. Another early source that some journalists tapped was the Zagreb Mosque, which became a haven for some of the worst-affected victims, rape victims, for example. My initial call on the Imam there - later the ranking Muslim cleric in Bosnia - was another eye-opener - as he detailed the kinds of trauma that the many Muslims seeking refuge there had experienced.

But, as I mentioned, by late summer 1992, increasing numbers of journalists were showing up. Rarely did a week go by when I didn't give several background briefings for journalists. For the most part these were not second stringers, but some of the bigger names from some of the most influential U.S. and other Western papers, periodicals, and television networks. I was pretty candid with them, but none ever violated the ground rules or betrayed my trust.

Q: Well there you were talking to all these journalists and, I would presume, defending a policy that it sounds like you did not have much faith in. How were you able to do that?

NEITZKE: I was rarely in a position of having to defend our policy, explain it, yes, often, but very few ever personally challenged me to defend it. I didn't believe then that the U.S. stance on Bosnia - under Bush or Clinton - even constituted a policy in the true sense of the word. We wished to stay out militarily, we urged the parties to come to terms, we contributed to the relief effort, we participated in efforts to broker a peace. But, with rare exception, our overriding objective until the summer of 1995 was to keep our engagement in every facet of the Bosnian mess limited, not to get out front. We succeeded so well in that endeavor, limiting our military engagement largely to a little-used MASH hospital at Zagreb airport, that by the end of 1994 NATO, most of whose other members had troops in harm's way in Bosnia, was splintering, mainly over our stubborn refusal to join in and lead.

There were others who did push me on policy. Dick Holbrooke comes most readily to mind. He visited a number of times, under IRC auspices, I believe. And I eventually discussed with him a list of specific policy recommendations. This was in December 1992 or January 1993, as the new Clinton team was getting up to speed. Dick later phoned me to say he had incorporated a number of my recommendations into a memo he'd sent to my old boss, then National Security Advisor-designate Tony Lake - although to no evident effect.

Q: I want to hear about that, but I think first we need to back up. We have not discussed the opening of the Embassy. I think you said you had a group of Senators there.

NEITZKE: It was a minor miracle that we pulled it off with as much dignity and fanfare as we did - amid a large CODEL - given the small staff on hand. Much credit for that goes to a young TDY Management Officer we got from London, John Dinkelman. But let me just back up a bit further, to the day, the night actually, when we announced our intention to establish full diplomatic relations with Croatia. It was mid-August 1992. I got a call at home from Eagleburger's office informing me that the Department was going to announce shortly our intention to establish diplomatic relations with Croatia and open an Embassy. I phoned Tudjman and gave him the news. There was a pause, in which I presume Tudjman was conveying this to those in his office, and then I heard muffled cheers and shouting in the background. It's clear they considered our action a major, long-awaited step toward legitimacy. Tudjman warmly thanked me. They were happy; they had a long way still to go, but in a sense, they seemed to feel, they had made it.

We set the date for the formal Embassy opening to coincide with the visit of a six-Senator CODEL headed by Majority Leader Mitchell in late August. The others were Rudman, Pell, Sasser, Lautenberg, and Jeffords. We took them to what were by then becoming the usual stops: a destroyed town in Sector West, UNPROFOR, UNHCR, and lunch hosted by Tudjman with members of his government. We also took them to a Bosnian refugee camp in Zagreb, paired each with an interpreter, and gave them plenty of time to sit and chat with some of the victims. From the quiet on the bus as we pulled away, it appeared that most of the Senators were genuinely moved.

The Embassy opening ceremony was in two parts, the first inside, televised, in which I, Prime Minister Sarinic, and Senator Mitchell made brief remarks. I spoke partly in Croatian, comparing what Croatia was going through with our own long struggle for independence and asserting - in an obvious stretch - that the U.S. government, from President Bush on down, sympathized with Croatia's plight and suffering. We then proceeded outside to the front of the building - all traffic having been stopped on neighboring streets and a huge crowd having gathered - for the presentation of the colors - we had flown in a Marine color guard from Germany for this purpose - the playing of the national anthem, and the formal ribbon cutting.

In our ride to the airport, Mitchell and I continued our discussion of the previous evening. He wanted to know - leaving aside the question of military intervention - specifically what he should recommend that the U.S. do. This was still early days for me, but opportunity rarely comes calling when you're ready, so I told him what I thought.

Q: Which was?

NEITZKE: The question was, what could we do - that Washington might at least be willing to consider doing - to get the camps opened, the prisoners released, and the cleansing, killing, and raping stopped. Milosevic had the power to stop it. How could we get his attention? At that point I had not yet come around on the idea of arming the Bosnian Muslims. I said that, strategically, we should focus less on the dim prospects for quickly altering the balance of power on the ground in Bosnia - that could be very problematical, even counterproductive, in the short run - and more on bombing Serbian artillery emplacements, logistical facilities, and power centers, including in Serbia. I believed that air power could be used, not to clear and hold terrain in Bosnia, but to force the Serbs to the negotiating table. Air Force Chief of Staff General Merrill McPeak also argued the feasibility of air power in 1992, to take out Serbian artillery surrounding Sarajevo, for example, but was shortly thereafter replaced on the JCS by an officer more willing to toe the line, that is, that the only military option was committing a politically inconceivable number of ground troops to Bosnia. In the end, we did bomb the Serbs to the negotiating table in Bosnia and we did - over Kosovo - bomb Belgrade. I believe to this day - and Holbrooke indirectly acknowledged as much at the time - that our bombing of Belgrade sprang not just from events in Kosovo but in part from the Clinton Administration's deep frustration, its sense of guilt over its prolonged moral impotence, its refusal to get serious about Bosnia.

But getting back to what I advised Mitchell, my strongest actionable recommendation to him was that we close Embassy Belgrade, that we withdraw our legitimizing diplomatic presence from that regime of butchers, or butcher-facilitators. I also recommended opening an Embassy, even if it were a one-man post, in Sarajevo and raising the American flag there as high as we could as a symbol that we were standing with those beleaguered people. And finally, I recommended an all-out U.S. effort to document the war rimes occurring in Bosnia.

When Mitchell got back to Washington he did publicly advocate breaking relations with Belgrade, and I believe he said he discussed it with Eagleburger. That would no doubt have been a terribly difficult recommendation for Eagleburger, or anyone who had warm memories of serving in Belgrade, to ponder. Whether Mitchell also mentioned to Eagleburger my advocacy of this idea, I don't know.

Q: Well, sure, Larry Eagleburger was not going to be very enamored of that. I mean, he was really Mr. Yugoslavia. But I was wondering, did you ever put that advice in a regular front channel telegram, to close Embassy Belgrade and all?

NEITZKE: Not at that point. And as time went on, I concluded that the best hope I had for altering our policy was simply to report the facts, to describe as vividly, as graphically as possible what was actually happening in Bosnia and, of course, Croatia. This led to a virtual flood of Embassy Zagreb reports of grisly crimes committed by Serbian forces in and around the various concentration camps. Many of these were based on debriefings of camp survivors released into a special facility in Karlovac, Croatia, beginning in the fall of 1992.

Regarding Embassy Belgrade, however, our having kept it open, near the end of my year as chief of mission, Embassy Belgrade asked the Department for permission to establish direct contact with authorities in the Serb-occupied area of Eastern Slavonia. In response to that I sent in one of the more scathing cables I'd ever drafted, attacking both the propriety of such contacts, which would tend to legitimize these thugs, and the proposal that contact be made by officials of a U.S. Embassy in a capital run by these thugs' war criminal sponsors. Belgrade's proposal was so beyond the pale that I took the opportunity, in essence, to denounce our having even maintained an Embassy in Belgrade during that long first year of genocidal slaughter. In policy and moral terms, I asked, had it been worth the candle? Had our presence not helped to legitimize Milosevic? Had the additional intelligence we may have gained by remaining in Belgrade actually informed our policy in any demonstrable way? I argued it had not. My friends in Belgrade were not happy about that one, but they did not appeal. The matter was dropped.

As for Eagleburger, apparently he did consider, or at least said he had considered, closing Embassy Belgrade, breaking diplomatic relations, but declined to do so. There were two events around that time, late summer 1992, that even more clearly illustrated Eagleburger's thinking about Belgrade. The first was his speech to the London Conference in late August. That was the meeting hastily staged by British PM Major, with Washington's blessing, to try to blunt the call for Western military intervention over the initial death camp reports. At the table were not only Western government officials but Milosevic, Tudjman, and Izetbegovic as well. In his speech Eagleburger stressed the theme of Serbian victimhood, that history hadn't begun yesterday, that Serbs were among World War II's primary victims, and that memories of that were still fresh. Or so he maintained. He said the U.S. valued its long "special relationship" with the Serbian people - not Yugoslavia, but the Serbian people. Turning to the ongoing conflict, he declared all the sides guilty before acknowledging, barely, that Serbs were the most guilty. But then, rather than expressing sympathy for the real time, mainly Muslim victims of Serb-perpetrated horror, Eagleburger intoned, more in sorrow than in anger, that what the Serbs were then doing was mainly wrong because it violated the sacred memory of past Serbian victims. To anyone aware of what was happening in Bosnia at that moment, Eagleburger's remarks were literally breathtaking.

The other noteworthy event, or action, around that time which sheds light on Eagleburger's view of Belgrade was the Panic-Scanlan charade.

Q: You are speaking of John Scanlan, himself a former Ambassador to Belgrade?

NEITZKE: Jack had been Ambassador in Belgrade just before Warren Zimmerman. He was close to Eagleburger, and, as I think I mentioned, I had worked with him many years earlier, in the early 1980s. Here's what happened. In mid-summer 1992, Milosevic acquiesced in - or may have helped concoct - a plan whereby Milan Panic, a wealthy Serb-American businessman, became Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, with an ostensible mandate to stop the killing, respect Bosnia, and end what he termed the disgrace to the Serbian nation. Although Milosevic quickly marginalized him in Belgrade, Panic became a hyper-active visitor to Western capitals, pleading for restraint in dealing with Serbia. Panic's "Counselor" in this enterprise was Jack Scanlan. Panic and Scanlan would almost certainly have had to receive Eagleburger's blessing for this initiative, since they would presumably have required Treasury licenses exempting them from the sanctions and the currency control regime then in place on Belgrade. Throughout the fall and early winter of 1992, as the siege of Sarajevo and the killing elsewhere in Bosnia continued, the Department Spokesman kept lending respectability to the Panic experiment, expressing hope that Panic would be able to ameliorate the situation and speaking expectantly about the possibility of real change in Belgrade through elections scheduled for the end of the year. In the event, of course, those elections were yet another Milosevic-engineered farce, and the Milosevic-controlled Parliament sent Panic and Scanlan packing. All in all, the experiment had served mainly to help divert attention from what was happening in Bosnia, while providing Milosevic some Western "cover" during six critical months of slaughter.

Q: So you think this Panic thing, experiment as you called it, was all more or less a put up job by Eagleburger or...

NEITZKE: I can't prove it, but, as I indicated, the U.S. Government had to have approved it, at least tacitly. Eagleburger's intentions may have been more innocent, you know, we're not going to intervene no matter what, Bush and Baker have already decided that, so let's give this a try. Maybe that was the motivation. But I think there was more to it than that; I suspect Washington, and Eagleburger personally, may have helped orchestrate this attempt to bail out the Serbs. Here's how bad things got, though, just one example of what can result from that kind of desperate, sloppy policy-making. In October 1992, Washington decided to protest formally an egregious Serbian action in Eastern Slavonia, part of Croatia. I think it had to do with their harassment of efforts to secure the mass grave at the Ovcara pig farm into which the Serbs had dumped the 200 or so patients they had dragged out of the Vukovar Hospital a year earlier and summarily executed. In any event, now this is October, the midpoint of Panic's celebrated tenure as Prime Minister in Belgrade. The Department calculated, however, that Panic was already so marginalized that it was pointless to protest to him. So, what did they do? They instructed Embassy Belgrade to lodge this supposedly stiff protest of Serbian actions with their very own ex-Ambassador, Jack Scanlan. How perverse is that? It should have gone to Milosevic, and on the end of a spiked pole. Instead, they delivered it to the ex-U.S. Ambassador "Counselor" to the Serbian-American fake Prime Minister. I'm sure there have been even stranger moments in U.S. diplomatic history, but probably not many.

Q: What were they thinking? I suppose there just was no one... Anyway, let us again go back to where you were talking about after the Embassy opening. How did that change things for you and your staff? And also, how were you evaluating the Croatian reaction to persecution of the Bosnian Muslims? There was no love lost between these groups

NEITZKE: When we became an Embassy, we were obviously on our own, but we'd been virtually on our own anyway. And given the lag time to increase staffing, we became heavily dependent on TDYers from various agencies and other posts. Again, however, there wasn't a lot of time to sit back and plan things.

Croatian-Muslim relations in that period were a key issue. Tudjman occasionally spoke disdainfully about Izetbegovic, though not in ethnic or religious terms - at least none that I ever heard - but rather in terms of Izetbegovic's ill preparedness to lead, decisions he had supposedly bungled, that sort of thing. And whatever Tudjman and Milosevic may have discussed or agreed at Karadjordjevo, if that meeting ever took place, it didn't manifest itself on the ground in Bosnia in any sustained way. Yes, as the conflict wore on, especially into 1993 and 1994, there was the odd tactical Serb-Croat alliance at the local level. There were even a couple of odder local Serb-Muslim tactical alliances. None of that endured, however, and none of what little there was operated by strategic design or direction; there was just no compelling evidence to support that claim, no matter how often Serbian sympathizers trotted it out. And throughout this early period, Croatia, with much of its outlying infrastructure destroyed or badly damaged from its own war with Belgrade, was inundated with hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslim refugees. Despite the obvious destabilizing aspects of such a mass movement, there were very few instances of significant Croat-Muslim tension in Croatia.

Let me tell you about something that happened over Labor Day weekend 1992 that puts some of this in perspective, the issue of Croat-Muslim ties in the early phase of the conflict. I had been there only about a month and a half. I received word from Rick Herrick, our military attachï¿½, that an Iranian 747 had landed at Zagreb. We suspected it was loaded with arms.

Almost immediately, Tudjman called me in. Although there may well have been Iranian flights before my arrival, perhaps landing elsewhere in Croatia, Tudjman knew we were now watching things more closely. I think he suspected we were already on to this. When I sat down with him and Susak, they volunteered that the plane contained arms, ammunition, chemicals of unknown composition, and an unspecified number of mujahideen fighters of unknown origin. I later learned from Susak that these were not the first mujahideen to attempt to enter Bosnia through Croatia. Croatia had set up training camps to get their own men quickly trained during the Croatian War. Susak implied that some of these foreign fighters had later spent time in Croatian training camps. Although I couldn't get a number from Susak, my sense was that mujahideen entering up to that point could be counted in the hundreds rather than the thousands. Regarding the mujahideen on this Iranian flight, Susak said they'd already taken off. They'd left for Bosnia, I presumed.

Tudjman asked me almost plaintively whether, if the arms couldn't be transshipped to the Muslims, Croatia couldn't just keep them. I told him no. I thought they'd have to be impounded under some type of international control.

I contacted EUR to talk about how this should be handled. It was a Saturday and I got Assistant Secretary Niles or one of his deputies. The response I got was, in essence, what's the big deal, why are you bothering us, it's not a U.S. problem. They first said that I needn't respond at all to Tudjman's request for guidance but then allowed that, if I felt compelled to, I could tell Tudjman he might order the Iranian plane to leave, with the arms.

This was the same nonchalant attitude I'd encountered in EUR on going out to Zagreb. This was nuts. An Iranian 747 loaded with arms, mujahideen, and chemicals had landed, and why was I bothering them? There had been fears for some time that the Bosnian Muslims might resort to some form of chemical warfare to try to halt the Serb advance. And here was clear evidence of mujahideen entering the fight. I don't recall exactly how this happened, but in short order EUR was all but shunted aside and I was dealing, and would continue to deal for the next couple days, with the office of the Acting Secretary, Arnie Kanter, Under Secretary for Political Affairs. Eagleburger must have been traveling. I became sort of a clearinghouse over the next 48 hours, taking calls, making suggestions, and conveying understandings among Tudjman and Susak, the UNPROFOR commander in Zagreb, the UN Secretariat, USUN, and Kanter's office. The solution was to let the Iranian plane go but seize and sequester the arms under UNPROPOR control. And that was done, although to this day - UNPROFOR was swamped and a blur of other events followed - I don't know where those arms ended up. The chemicals turned out to be non-threatening, medical supplies apparently.

The point is, getting back to your question about Croatia's attitude toward the Muslims, the shopworn charge that from the outset they were just as bad as the Serbs is absurd on its face. In addition to admitting the Muslim refugees, the Croats - with Iran and other suppliers - were running a military supply line to the Muslims when nobody else was doing so. Admittedly, this was not altruistic. The Croats were taking some of the arms for themselves and the Croats in Bosnia stood to benefit from almost anything the Muslims could do to help slow down the Serbs. And, too, this arrangement didn't last far into 1993; it began to break down seriously by the late spring. And we can get to that later, because it's also part of the backdrop for the secret 1994-1995 Iranian arms pipeline fiasco that PFIAB, or I guess it was the Intelligence Oversight Board, and several congressional committees later investigated and that I was called to testify before.

Q: Yes. I do want to cover that.

NEITZKE: But I found myself having to fight repeatedly, often in sharply - worded cables, the notion that the Serbs and Croats were acting indistinguishably badly toward the Bosnian Muslims. I typically did this by challenging an Embassy Belgrade or U.S. military report, or a Department tasker perhaps, but my real target were higher-ups in the Department who were wedded to this, what I once called in a cable, "policy-stultifying myth." I wasn't just challenging this notion out of the blue, we were going all out to record and report testimony from Muslim survivors of Serb-run death camps, grisly, graphic, gut-wrenching, credible, eye-witness evidence which, taken in its entirety and viewed against the backdrop of everything else we knew, made a mockery of the contention that the crimes of Serbs and Croats in Bosnia were anywhere near equivalent. In the most biting of these, essentially protest cables, which I titled "The Ugly Virus of Moral Symmetry," I pretty much just let them have it, slamming the outrageous inaccuracies in an Embassy Belgrade assessment of Croatian strategy in Bosnia. I think it was for that cable that I got a call from EUR DAS Ralph Johnson warning me to knock it off, because I would never, Ralph flatly stated, never convince Washington that the Croats weren't as god awful as the Serbs in persecuting Muslims. They just didn't want to hear it. Their minds were made up. A policy of limited engagement depended critically on a view that all sides, or at least the Serbs and Croats, were nearly equally guilty. So reports indicating that the vast preponderance of the killing, raping, and ethnic cleansing was being done by one side were unwelcome.

Q: So you had to be careful, I take it, from then on, I mean with the warning...

NEITZKE: I was already being careful to hew to the facts as we could document them, and as much as possible to let those facts speak for themselves. But no, it didn't stop me from challenging what I thought Washington was getting wrong. And a couple times I guess you could say I tempted fate, once directly challenging the Serbo-philia of senior Yugo hands in Washington as well as their long-standing anti-Croatian biases. I think it was a cable in early 1993 addressing whether Tudjman should be invited, along with other heads of State, to the formal opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. I didn't recommend for or against, only that the issue be weighed objectively, indicating that it was clear that objectivity would be extremely difficult for some in the Department. I later learned, I think Reggie Bartholomew told me, he was then Special Envoy for the former Yugoslavia, that that cable had been carefully read at senior levels and had had an impact. No one offered a mea culpa - Eagleburger and Scowcroft were by then out of the picture, but Tudjman was invited and did attend the ceremony, where, as it turned out, he was roundly condemned by Elie Wiesel.

Earlier, on the eve of Clinton's inauguration, I had weighed in on the broader dimensions of our Bosnia policy, criticizing Washington's readiness to impugn the cantons plan that David Owen had painstakingly fashioned without offering any credible alternative. This marked the culmination of a period in which the Bush Administration - although this was carried over into the Clinton Administration - constantly nitpicked and undercut the efforts of Owen and his co-negotiators. There was this incessant criticism of whatever the negotiators came up with - as though we knew that the Muslims deserved better, even if weren't actually willing to put any U.S. assets on the line to achieve that.

Q: Well, a couple things. Here we have high-level officials in Washington trying to keep a lid on things, at least to pretend that the killing and ethnic cleansing are balanced, so the United States would not feel forced to intervene. And there you are, not a very senior officer yet, charge, or chief of mission, in a new country and all, screwing it up with your reports. I would think the knives would be out for you. And why...

NEITZKE: How did I survive?

Q: Exactly. How did you survive? Why were you kept there instead of being pulled out and replaced with a more compliant officer? I mean, that is how it is usually handled.

NEITZKE: It often felt like a high-wire act with no net. And I haven't yet mentioned some of the other things we were doing. On what and how we reported, however, I never considered changing course. State would obviously have welcomed reports that could have helped buttress a policy of limited U.S. engagement, shown that the slaughter was not as one-sided as it was. Mere silence from us would have been appreciated. But it wasn't my job to manufacture policy-supportive data to document the supposed amoral symmetry of the so-called conflicting parties. From everything I was hearing and reading, from all the information pouring into the Embassy, and it was considerable, in all channels, it was clear that what was happening in Bosnia, essentially on our doorstep and on my watch, was genocide. Despite differences on nuance, and varying degrees of sympathy for the Muslims, that was a view shared, without equivocation, by every element in the Embassy.

Were the knives out? It felt that way from time to time. But nearly everything we were doing, however unwelcome some in Washington might have found it, was unimpeachable from a professional standpoint. In my demarches and discussions with Tudjman, I was executing our policy and my instructions to the letter. I remember one very frank exchange with Tudjman, in which I, reflecting Washington's views, essentially called him a liar. In light of what I later learned, I'm not sure that what I said to Tudjman in that exchange was warranted, that what we were alleging he was up to was grounded on hard fact; it later appeared not to have been. But whether or not I was being appropriately tough with Tudjman, if someone high up in Washington wants you removed, you're gone. I did get a couple warnings, essentially to tow the line or else. And a couple of officers who came out challenged me, shouting, in one instance, that they knew I didn't support U.S. policy. But the call you're talking about call never came. One well-placed friend in the Department, who was reading everything I was sending in, told me he just couldn't figure it out, why I hadn't been yanked in favor of, as you put it, a more compliant officer.

Q: Did you feel that you had any allies in Washington, if not covering your back personally, at least sympathetic to the policy points you were making?

NEITZKE: Not personal allies, exactly, but those who were sympathetic on the policy front, sure. Nearly everyone beneath the EUR front office and the 7th Floor at State who knew anything about Bosnia was sympathetic. Our death camp survivor accounts were being widely read, and they, along with everything else, had an effect. Some, I was told, found the graphic nature of our reports so disturbing that they had to stop reading them. But handling the stress was different for those of us in the field. I could give a background briefing to The New York Times or CNN, or send in a tough cable and feel at the end of the day that I'd done some good, spread some truth. Or my wife could load up our car and take fruit or something out to the refugees and she could feel good about having done something tangible. We were right there. But for those in Washington working directly on this at lower levels it must have been harder, because they knew the truth and there wasn't much of anything they could do to make themselves feel better, let alone to change policy. Four young FSOs did resign in 1992-1993, however. And a group of 10 FSOs in Washington formally dissented in mid-1993 and met with Christopher - for which I heard one EUR DAS refer to them disdainfully as "wayward children." That was the attitude. Some who were troubled by our stance on Bosnia asked to be reassigned to other jobs. And some plodded on, not liking the policy but accepting that, at the end of the day, it's a paycheck.

Q: Well do you know whether any of your reports directly affected any of the officers who resigned, did you ever hear?

NEITZKE: I don't know. As I said, I know they were being read, so I have no doubt that they were affecting people's thinking to some extent. But whether they actually pushed anyone over the brink, I just don't know. Other than George Kenney, briefly, who was the first to leave, I didn't know any of the officers who resigned. George was our desk officer when he resigned. He was among those whom the 6th and 7th Floor accused of seeking to change U.S. policy through their inputs into the daily press guidance. You know, try to get the spokesman to confirm on the record that we did know about the death damps and so forth. But he was just doing his job. All of these guys I guess felt increasingly marginalized and concluded that resignation was the only honorable option available to them.

But getting back to your earlier question, how I survived bureaucratically, some of what I was sending in doubtless fell beneath the radar of the most senior officials. Bosnia may have been on the front page every day, but it wasn't the only issue Washington had to deal with. The transition in late 1992-early 1993, from Bush to Clinton, would have been a huge distraction for senior officials, including FSOs, worried about their futures. And it probably didn't hurt that my old boss, Tony Lake, was the new, incoming National Security Advisor.

Q: So you felt protected?

NEITZKE: No. Not by Lake, at least as far as I'm aware. In fact, I never communicated with Lake, except that one time through Holbrooke.

Q: Lake never came out?

NEITZKE: No. I wondered whether, ironically, it wasn't Eagleburger himself who'd cut me some slack. But I don't know. Anyway, I too was to have been transitional. An ambassador was to have been appointed after we established formal relations with Zagreb, but that came undone after Bush lost, so I ended up running the place for a year.

Q: And you never felt like resigning, giving up, maybe making a public splash and leaving? I mean, I can still hear the frustration in your voice even after all these years.

NEITZKE: Actually, Stu, long periods now go by when I no longer think about all this. But it was frustrating, and I learned that a few of my Washington colleagues more than once thought I might be on the brink of a pubic resignation. Galbraith mentioned that concern to me shortly after his arrival. The only time I gave any thought to that, and only very briefly, was near the end of 1992, but I opted not to. It might have been cathartic for me, but it wouldn't likely have helped anyone else. I decided it was important to keep doing what I was doing.

Q: Okay, I want to get to another subject we have only touched on. That is the role of the U.S. military. But first, you mentioned other things you were doing that might have gotten under Washington's skin. Like what?

NEITZKE: Well, before we go there, I should say something about the primary source that informed our perception that what was happening in Bosnia was not a civil war, let alone a reemergence of age old ethnic hatreds, as some in the Administration alleged, but genocide. I mentioned that in early August we began sending in reports of alleged atrocities in Bosnia, but there weren't that many that were detailed enough or sufficiently corroborated. But that situation changed. The media had increased their focus on the Serb-run death camps - that, by the way, was a term Eagleburger hated and in late August was still disparaging; he set the death camp standard explicitly at the "Bergen-Belsen" level and referred to the Bosnian camps as "unpleasant conditions." In any event, as a result of the media's focus on the camps and the ICRC's belated attention to them, Serb leaders decided to close some of the camps, sanitized parts of others for Western inspection, moved some prisoners to less lethal facilities, and generally slowed the intake of Muslim prisoners. Then in September, this is still 1992, the Serbs decided to turn over to the ICRC an initial group of 1,000 or so survivors to be taken to the holding facility I mentioned in Karlovac, Croatia, a little over an hour southwest of Zagreb.

From that point on, I sent anyone we could spare down to Karlovac to interview these men. The most prolific contributor to this effort was a young TDY FSO from Embassy Bonn, Dubravka Maric, who spoke Croatian, or Bosnian, with near native fluency. Dubravka and other Embassy Zagreb FSOs, and two other female FSOs we later brought in specifically to interview rape victims, produced a steady stream of reports to Washington and our regular European embassy and military command addressees detailing multiply-corroborated, eye-witness accounts of mass executions and some of the most sadistic barbarities you could imagine one human being inflicting on another.

Well, I take that back. Actually, it would be all but impossible for you to imagine some of these crimes, some of the torture and killing techniques in the camps, they were so gruesome, unless you were a full-blown psychopath, which I suspect some of the worst perpetrators were. In all cases reported by the Karlovac survivor group, the perpetrators were Serb and in nearly all cases the victims were Muslim. These Embassy Zagreb reports, combined with those from a few other U.S. Embassies in countries to which some of these survivors were eventually moved, constituted a substantial portion of the eight compendia - brief summaries of which the State Department made public contemporaneously - that the U.S. forwarded to the United Nations between September 1992 and May 1993.

Q: This was because the UN was asking for these, or why send it to them?

NEITZKE: The Security Council had passed resolutions calling on member states to report information of this sort about what was happening in Bosnia. These reports, many of the reports we sent in, served as a key part of the initial data base for the UN Bosnia War Crimes Commission. Formally it was called the Commission of Experts, the Kalshoven Commission. It was set up in October 1992 and, after months of dithering, and worse, ultimately did contribute critically to the establishment of The Hague Tribunal.

Q: Well, Washington, the U.S. Government supported all that, did they not?

NEITZKE: Yes, but there's a caveat. While the U.S. took the lead on the war crimes data collection effort, the Commission, and eventually the Tribunal, and became the single largest source of funding for this effort, and at times had to drag other governments along kicking and screaming, our own initial impulse on this front was not as straightforward as it appeared. Throughout this early period, when we were sending in these grisly reports of Serb torture and killings, the State Department remained obsessively fixed on the idea of striking a balance, on the notion that there was in fact a balance to be struck, between Serb and Croat and, to some extent, Muslim-committed crimes.

I recall appeal after appeal from the Department to posts in the area for more evidence that all sides were engaging in ethnic cleansing and atrocities. They argued in one cable that unless we could provide more evidence of Croatian and Muslim excesses the credibility of our reporting of Serb crimes might be fatally compromised. In desperation, the Department began tossing into the mix, into the published compendia of war crimes testimonies to which I referred, uncorroborated second and third-hand reports of crimes committed against Bosnian Serbs, some from highly questionable Serb Orthodox Church sources. I sent in a protest of this apparent effort to cook the books, chiding the Department for resorting to notoriously unreliable sources in its quest for artificial balance, and arguing that we needed to let the chips fall where they may. For that, I finally got, if not quite an apology, at least a muted acknowledgement of my point. And they stopped including these suspect reports.

Then at the end of 1992, Eagleburger, speaking at a Geneva conference on the former Yugoslavia, delivered a quasi mea culpa on the war crimes issue, declaring that the West had an obligation not to stand back a second time in that century while a people faced obliteration - which was of course almost exactly what the Bush Administration and he, Eagleburger, up to that moment, had done. Eagleburger then named names, mostly Serbian, including Mladic and Karadzic - still at large 14 years later, by the way - and acknowledged that we knew who had committed the crimes and who had given the orders, who their political superiors were. On the eve of Eagleburger's speech, however, I had received an urgent call from a senior officer in EUR requesting names of suspect Croats whom Eagleburger could list alongside the Serbs to balance things out. I had no comparable names to give them. If I had, I'd have long since reported them. But this idea, that while the Serbs might have behaved worse in Bosnia than others, they hadn't behaved all that much worse, simply would not go away; it was too deeply ingrained.

Q: How did you know what the breakdown was? I mean, you were reporting from your side on what the Muslim and Croat victims said, but, as you say, there were Serb victims also.

NEITZKE: Yes, there were Serb victims. But while we reported anything we picked up on Croatian Government mistreatment of Croatian Serbs, and, to the limited degree possible, on conditions in the Serb-occupied Krajina, we weren't in a position to interview Bosnian Serb victims; they weren't fleeing towards Croatia, they weren't accessible to us. So the Department kept exhorting Embassy Belgrade to do more of this reporting, but very little was forthcoming. I'm not sure what the problem was. One Embassy Belgrade officer told me that early on they were subject to almost insurmountable corroboration requirements on the forwarding of atrocity reports that were coming in mainly telephonically from contacts in Bosnia. I understand that the media in Serbia at the time were full of graphic Serb victim reports; Serbs as perpetual victims was, after all, one of the central themes of Milosevic's propaganda machine. But, for whatever reason, Embassy Belgrade sent in comparatively few cables reporting the first person testimony of Serb victims. One obvious reason may have been the simple fact that there were incomparably fewer Serb than Muslim or Croatian victims.

Q: But again, how did you know that? I see that that was your impression, but...

NEITZKE: From everything that I was seeing and hearing. Our war crimes reporting effort, mainly the reports from the Karlovac holding facility, indicated early on that Serbs were perpetrating something akin to genocide against the Bosnian Muslims. And some of these cabled eye-witness reports we were sending in quickly became public. Washington became sufficiently concerned that by late 1992 they had authorized a parallel, secret Bosnian war crimes reporting operation, which ultimately harvested many hundreds of overwhelmingly Serb perpetrator-Muslim victim testimonies. These, however, although they may at some later point have been handed over to the UN or the Tribunal, did not see the light of day at the time. I saw many of them, and I urged that they be declassified and immediately made public, but they were not. I even prompted one non-governmental congressional witness to demand the disclosure of these reports, but nothing happened. So, as lopsidedly Serb perpetrator-Muslim victim as was almost everything that did publicly surface, it was, to some extent, only the tip of the iceberg of similar evidence that the public was not seeing.

Q: Wait. Washington was trying to keep as much of this as possible secret because...

NEITZKE: My guess is that it was for the same reason that they'd pleaded ignorance of what was going on in Bosnia in the first place, because they feared it might generate more public pressure on them to do something. At the time they set up the secret mechanism, there was talk of greater efficiency. But rather than send us more TDY personnel to interview death camp survivors - a task at which we were demonstrably proficient - Washington wanted to use an existing operation, standing teams that, with the Cold War all but over, had time on their hands. In any event, this decision had the effect of shunting a huge number of war crimes reports into controllable, classified channels.

And it wasn't just the separate, secret harvesting of so many atrocity accounts. There was the long hiatus after the UN established the Kalshoven Commission before anything serious was done to bring heat on the Serbian leaders directing the slaughter. In early 1993 even Kalshoven complained privately that he was being pressured to drag his feet and, specifically, not to finger Serbian leaders with whom Vance, Owen or others might need to negotiate a peace settlement. That pressure appears to have come from a senior British official in the UN Legal Department, the same guy who later sought to ensure an artificial balance - between Serbs and others - in the first tranche of Hague Tribunal indictments. But it's likely there was sympathy on both counts, respectively, from the Bush and Clinton Administrations. So while it's fair to say that the U.S. was the strongest backer of war crimes data collection and prosecution, it would be wrong to conclude that we went all out to ensure that the process proceeded as swiftly and in as straightforward a manner as possible.

In the end, the secret set-up may not have mattered, at least in one sense, since Washington's appetite for the kind of reports we were sending in, even on the human rights side of the house, was waning, especially as we moved into 1993. The Clinton State Department abruptly halted publication of the UN-bound compendia of such reports in June or July of 1993. That was about the time that the Clinton team, including Lake and Christopher, went into a pox-on-all-their-houses, full-court press to try to get Bosnia off the front pages.

But getting back to your central question, how did we know who was doing what to whom in Bosnia overall, and in what proportion, by far the most authoritative analysis of that issue was completed by the CIA in late 1994. As described in The New York Times in early 1995, the Agency study was a long, exhaustively thorough, and highly classified all-source analysis of that very question. It concluded that Serbs were guilty of at least 90 percent of the ethnic cleansing, killings and atrocities up to that point, that, overwhelmingly, Muslims had been the victims, and that this activity had almost certainly been orchestrated by Serbian political leaders. That was quite a contrast with what I'd heard out at Langley in the summer of 1993, in the conversation I mentioned earlier.

Q: So you felt vindicated by the CIA study?

NEITZKE: The CIA's conclusions were almost exactly those that I had offered in front channel analyses two years earlier. Some of the language they used was nearly identical to what I'd sent in. But so many more victims had been killed in the interim, and the U.S. in early 1995 was still sitting, actually by then squirming nervously, on the sidelines, that any sense of vindication wasn't terribly sweet.

But for anyone involved in Bosnia policy, or anyone who followed the debate on what to do about Bosnia, or anyone who may have been confused about what actually transpired in Bosnia, the CIA study stands, as closely as anything can, as an unimpeachable judge of the facts. It makes nonsense of Serb apologists' claims of equal guilt, of American policymakers' evocations of ancient ethnic hatreds, of the EC's suggestion that Croatian crimes in Bosnia in 1993 surpassed anything the Serbs did, and of the countless other insulting lies told to justify our own policy of abject cowardice. No other document has come out of the war or its aftermath, even from The Hague Tribunal, that provides such an unambiguous and damning apportionment of guilt for the mass crimes committed in Bosnia.

Q: Well, I am curious about something you said, to back up just a little. I believe you stated that someone in Washington, you seemed to imply that this was someone on the intelligence side, in effect took over a large part of the effort to collect eye-witness reports of atrocities and killings in Bosnia. You described this as a secret program. How was that possible? Most of these victims were in Bosnia or Croatia, were they not? How could it have been secret, without the involvement of your Embassy or the Croatian Government?

NEITZKE: It wasn't. We were both involved, the Embassy and the Croatian Government. But I have to tread a bit carefully here.

Q: Can you be at all more specific?

NEITZKE: As I said, when this issue arose, I argued that any additional personnel to be devoted to harvesting what was, in effect, war crimes testimony, should be assigned to our Embassy, that they should work openly on this as other Embassy officers were then doing, and that whatever they produced should be included in the published compendia that State was periodically forwarding to the UN. I thought we in the Embassy could do the job more efficiently. But it wasn't just a question of efficiency. To do this secretly would require our establishing a working relationship with elements of Tudjman's security apparatus not known for their devotion to democratic ideals. Establishing those ties at that time, I argued, would send the wrong message to Tudjman.

I made my case to Washington but was overruled. They were determined to set up this new link. My job, I was told, was to make sure it didn't backfire. So what we did was to first ask Tudjman to clean house, as it were, to replace certain people. The key individual replaced later publicly condemned Tudjman's even entertaining our request, but Tudjman himself was receptive. Actually, receptive barely describes his reaction. He was virtually ecstatic over the prospect of this new sphere of cooperation with the United States. So we went forward. Although this hadn't been Washington's, certainly not Eagleburger's, intent - they did this mainly to get a better grip on the reporting of Serbian war crimes - this new engagement with Tudjman made him less receptive to our and others' later calls for greater respect of democratic rights. And it gave others direct access to Tudjman's inner circle in a way that didn't always support the message that I was trying to get across. I did my best to stay on top of it and protested a couple times when this new tie threatened to get out of hand, but the effect of this move on Tudjman was not helpful on balance.

Q: Okay, I think I know what you are alluding to and I guess we should leave it at that. Now, getting back, you suggested that you and the Embassy were doing a number of things in that first year, in addition to the atrocity reporting, that may have gotten on Washington's nerves.

NEITZKE: When the first group of death camp survivors arrived in Karlovac, and it appeared that subsequent releases would depend in part on the speed with which these men could be moved on to third countries, I sent in a message - the idea came from a Econ Officer Tom Mittnacht - proposing that the U.S. quickly admit some of them, as something we should do for its own sake and as an incentive to other Western countries to do the same. Shortly thereafter, the USG itself estimated that there were up to 70,000 prisoners in 45, nearly all Serb-run, camps in Bosnia. The ICRC said nearly all were in unheated buildings facing "Siberian-like" conditions. Yet the Department all but shot down our proposal, citing a host of bureaucratic reasons, behind which clearly lay the message that Washington really, really, didn't want to take these people.

Q: So, what happed to them, the former prisoners in Croatia, and those still held in Bosnia?

NEITZKE: We and a few other, mainly European, countries, did eventually admit some of these men for resettlement. But most of the initial tranche of released prisoners languished for months in cramped, fairly squalid conditions in Karlovac. There was heat, food, and health care, but it was still pretty grim. I visited a couple times. It was important to try to move these people along if one were to press the Serbs to release more prisoners. But, seeing that very few of these men were moving onward, out of Croatia, the Croats eventually balked at admitting many more, which played into the Serbs' hands. By then they had their own reasons to drag their feet on more releases. Some well-documented camp populations in Bosnia seemed to disappear. Others, with a bad winter setting in, presumably died from the effects of their mistreatment while waiting, against the odds, for their own release.

Here's another example of what we tried to do. An Embassy officer brought me what appeared to be reliable reports that women and girls being held in one particular mass rape facility could be gotten out for a specific per-head ransom. I appealed to the Department for a small amount of funds to explore this, to see whether we could get some of these women and girls out, again, a gesture for its own sake but something that also might help shed light on this widespread atrocity. My proposal was not well received, but they couldn't just reject it. Instead there began a lengthy runaround, with numerous requests for more information, which they knew would be tough to get. Finally, Washington asked ICRC and UNHCR to confirm the location of the alleged rape facility, as though they'd be able to drive right up and check it out, which of course they would not do and could not do but were reluctant to acknowledge. So, in the end, after all the foot-dragging, nothing came of that effort either.

Q: Anything else, other things you attempted?

NEITZKE: We were looking for leverage wherever we could find it, to try to get Washington to do the right thing, or - let me be precise - at the very least to begin telling Congress and the American people the truth about what was happening in Bosnia. Then, if the President chose to do nothing, so be it. That's his prerogative. But let's at least start with the truth; this is genocide in Europe, within shouting distance of the Holocaust. We'd all mouthed the words "never again," yet here we were, watching genocide in Europe yet again. Our leaders knew full well that in this case the truth was less likely to set them free than to force their hand, so they fought it hard, as I've said, portraying Bosnia as a recurrence of age-old ethnic hatreds and arguing there was nothing we could do until these people tired of killing one another. In mid-1993, Secretary Christopher termed Bosnia "the problem from hell," before trying, to the extent possible, to wash his hands of it for two years. He made much of the fact that Muslims too had committed crimes - as it turned out, only perhaps one percent of the murders and ethnic cleansing vs. the Serbs' 90-plus percent. But in Christopher's calculus, even the Muslims couldn't lay claim to the moral high ground.

Throughout this period, I was meeting with various journalists, including a producer for NBC's "Today Show," who asked to film a segment with me on what I'd learned about the atrocities being committed in Bosnia. That required Department permission, and it took them about a minute to send me a curt, hell-no message. As I've mentioned, I also had the chance to chat at length with most of the Senators, Congressmen, and staffers who came out.

Q: Are any of those particularly notable, I mean, Senators, for example?

NEITZKE: Biden's visit was interesting. It was in the spring of 1993. I laid out for him over dinner - it was just Biden, me, and a few of his staff - what I thought should be done. Then I tried to dissuade him from traveling on to Belgrade for what I argued would be seen as yet another legitimizing meeting by a prominent Westerner with Milosevic. I said that, if he were intent on going, I hoped he'd issue a public statement branding Milosevic a probable war criminal. At his request, I produced a draft. This was at a point when Serbian forces were rampaging through Eastern Bosnia, vastly swelling the populations of the Muslim enclaves. Biden read my draft the next morning, appeared uncomfortable with its bluntness - he said, for example, that he didn't personally know whether Milosevic was a pathological liar, as I'd claimed - and he did travel on to Belgrade to meet with Milosevic. When he came back through Zagreb, he told me that he'd called Milosevic a war criminal to his face. His staff told me later, however, that that wasn't quite what had happened; Biden had merely commented to Milosevic that others said he was a war criminal. Ultimately, however, Biden backed forceful action against Belgrade. There were many others, many other discussions, with Warner, DeConcini, Moynihan, Specter, Levin, Hutchison, Lantos, Leach, and so on.

Q: Well, did this, I will not say deluge, but steady parade of CODELs and what not keep you from other, more important work, did you ever feel?

NEITZKE: Trying to get the Congress' attention on this was a pretty high priority. And, as I told Congressman Leach when he asked me that question, Zagreb wasn't exactly the Paris Air Show. No one came out in those years for the fun of it, or the shopping. I wanted to get everybody out there we possibly could.

We would take some of them down to Karlovac to meet with death camp survivors. Others came with their own priorities. Some were focused on getting into Bosnia, Senator Moynihan, for example. His planned flight into Sarajevo aboard a U.S. C-130 flying under UN relief auspices was quietly nixed by the Pentagon at the last minute, only they didn't tell him. Instead, they had the pilot tell him that flights into Sarajevo that day had been grounded for security reasons. When I informed the Senator that this was not the case, that planes were taking off even then for Sarajevo, he was furious. He sent off an angry cable to what he called his friend, then-Secretary of Defense Cheney, suggesting he'd been deliberately lied to. On returning to Washington he reiterated the charge in a speech on the Senate floor, mentioning my name and what I'd told him. Moynihan eventually did get to Sarajevo, accompanied by Galbraith. But, as with so many others who got in, he did so with assistance from us in circumventing Pentagon roadblocks and getting them on other Allied aircraft assigned to the UNHCR airlift.

Q: Anything else?

NEITZKE: Maybe just one more. This had to do with the DART, the Embassy's Disaster Assistance Response Team, a USAID group, tireless, incredibly resourceful, mostly contractors, if I recall, whose job it was to anticipate emerging relief needs in Bosnia and propose quick action to address them. This work required them to travel into Bosnia, often with UN convoys of one sort or another, usually to places which were reasonably safe. On occasion, however, they would come to me - I had to exercise go/no-go authority over all their trips into Bosnia - with a proposal that entailed significant danger. We knew generally where the front lines were, but we also knew that those lines could change rapidly. There was no question who'd be held to account if DART members were seriously injured or killed, but I don't think I ever denied a DART travel request into Bosnia. We may have delayed a couple trips briefly, but I don't think I ever denied one. I thought that their work was some of the most important that anyone was doing in the area.

Once, however, Tim Knight, the DART leader, asked permission for their most fearless member, Bill Stuebner, a wonderful guy, a hero in my view, to travel essentially through and behind Serbian lines to check out reports we were all receiving of extremely dire, possible starvation conditions in one or more of the eastern enclaves. Stuebner might face significant danger, yet, if he were willing to attempt it, I thought it worth the risk. When I asked, this one time only, for the Department's concurrence, they refused. They didn't say no, and they didn't question the evidence I presented of apparent conditions in the enclaves. They simply replied, gutlessly, that the decision - and, hence, the responsibility - would be mine alone.

I gave Stuebner the go-ahead. Eventually he and the Merhamet - Muslim Aid - group he was traveling with made their way into Gorazde, I think it was, and he gathered the information he needed. Then, when Stuebner's return was briefly delayed, Embassy Belgrade panicked. They'd had no role in the Stuebner trip. They knew, however, that Stuebner was traveling, in a sense, incognito and that if the Serb forces encircling the enclave got wind of his presence there they'd be incensed and Stuebner could be in danger. Nonetheless, our Belgrade Charge, who I was later told had complained bitterly to a group of Embassy subordinates that Stuebner's "cowboy adventure" threatened to derail his own long career, notified UNHCR Belgrade and asked that they check on Stuebner when they were next in that area. Of course, if UNHCR Belgrade had been doing its job, supplying the Muslim enclaves, a trip like Stuebner's wouldn't have been necessary. Instead, they often delivered much of their food to Serbia proper, or to Serb-held parts of Bosnia, with only a comparative trickle finding its way to Muslim areas. UNHCR Belgrade was notorious both for knuckling under to the Serbian goons manning the checkpoints that were strangling the Muslim enclaves, and for leaking sensitive information to the Serbs, which it appeared they quickly did in this case as well. In the end, Stuebner was able to exit the enclave in the same surreptitious way he'd gotten in, but not before the danger level had been jacked up needlessly by Embassy Belgrade's gratuitous action. We let them know just how grateful we were for their intervention.

Q: Well, I am sure you did.

NEITZKE: I mention this case for a couple reasons. First, to give more of the flavor of what it was like, of what we felt ourselves up against, in trying to get what was happening in Bosnia taken more seriously. And secondly, to highlight, as we moved into 1993 and later, the growing attention that we, UNPROFOR, UNHCR, and not least the U.S. military, would be forced to pay to the plight of the eastern enclaves. These are areas into which we ended up airdropping food, if you recall, and one of these, Srebrenica, was the scene in 1995 of the largest single mass murder in Europe since the Holocaust.

Q: Let's return to that, but maybe this would be a good point to talk more about the U.S. military. You said that you found their role in all this intriguing, if that was your term. What sort of contact did you or others in the Embassy have with our military during this period?

NEITZKE: From the onset of the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia in March of 1992 until the end of the Bush Administration, the military, the JCS, were more than willing to follow the White House and State Department lead. The policy, at all costs to limit our involvement as much as possible, was exactly what the JCS favored. If that required distorting the truth, misleading Congress and the American people, so be it, the JCS would gladly play their role.

Q: How so, exactly?

NEITZKE: When the press got into a couple Serb death camps in August 1992 and their reporting and video footage began rousing the American people to demand that something be done, the Pentagon went all out to counter this pressure. In mid-August testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Pentagon International Security Affairs Assistant Secretary Hadley called Bosnia a "blood feud" dating back centuries that threatened to suck us into an endless guerilla war. General McCaffrey, speaking for the JCS at that hearing, claimed it would take 400,000 troops to halt the violence in Bosnia. 400,000! He pointed out that Bosnia was even larger than South Vietnam and, lest anyone miss the point, some four times larger than Northern Ireland. For good measure, he hauled out the bogey of the Wehrmacht's troubles in wartime Yugoslavia. Plainly, Bosnia was way too tough for the U.S. even to consider doing anything about militarily. This was part of what prompted even Warren Zimmerman ultimately to condemn the JCS's anti-interventionist excesses as "disgraceful, cowardly, and insidious."

I remember a discussion at the Embassy with General Jim Jones...

Q: James Jones, Marine Corps Commandant and...

NEITZKE: I think he was a one-star then, 1992, but yes, he went on from his Bosnia watch job with EUCOM to a series of rapid promotions that ultimately took him to the JCS and Supreme Allied Commander. He came through from time to time for a chat and once showed me contingency plans for safeguarding a potential relief corridor from the Bosnian port of Ploce up to Mostar. This was clearly not something the military wanted to do. That task alone, the plan estimated, would require some 25,000 troops - which meant, he and I both knew, that it was effectively off the table; the Administration would not even consider it. And that, of course, was the point. The JCS were careful never to say outright that any given task in Bosnia couldn't be done, they'd simply attach a troop requirement to the task that was wildly beyond anything politically acceptable.

Q: You are saying it was all negative, our military's role, attitude, and...

NEITZKE: Not at all. As far as I could tell, our military, our soldiers and airmen, and women, did every task assigned them in the Balkans with the utmost professionalism, and, when required, bravery. The MASH field hospital at Zagreb airport, for example, technically part of UNPROFOR, was a thoroughly professional operation, albeit badly underutilized because of how far it was situated from UNPROFOR troops in the field. Our pilots, who flew into Sarajevo under UNHCR auspices, did a great job, repeatedly risking ground fire to get the planes in, as did the small team of U.S. military material handlers, I believe, at the Sarajevo airport. Our pilots who flew the airdrop flights over eastern Bosnia also performed well, even though they were directed to fly so high - for security reasons - that many drops fell far from their targets.

Q: So you blame the JCS for our reluctance to take any real risks at all?

NEITZKE: I do. I agree with Warren on that point. Here's another example of how the Pentagon's extreme aversion to risk-taking on Bosnia played out on the ground. When the decision was made to send UNPROFOR into Bosnia, and the Brits, the French, and most of the rest of our NATO allies started ponying up ground forces, in the fall of 1992, we held back, committing only the MASH hospital, which was to stay in Zagreb, and a tiny group assigned to UNPROFOR Sarajevo. As pressure built up on us over time to commit at least some ground forces somewhere in the area, the Pentagon finally agreed to send 500 or so U.S. troops to comparatively safe Macedonia, to help man border checkpoints as part of the so-called sanctions regime that had been imposed on Serbia. This deployment was intended to free up some of the Scandinavian forces already in Macedonia, who were redirected to more dangerous duty in Bosnia. Only that wasn't the end of it. After awhile, the Scandinavians remaining in Macedonia began complaining to the UN, and the UN began complaining to Washington, about the refusal of U.S. commanders on the scene to allow their troops to man even a few of the more challenging border-monitoring posts. That's how determined the JCS were not to get involved. The United Nations and the Nordics - the Nordics! - were complaining about our timidity. That's the sort of thing that contributed to the virtual blowout in NATO in late 1994 and early 1995 over the U.S.' refusal not only to lead in the Balkans but even to participate meaningfully alongside our NATO Allies.

Q: Well, that does sound bad...

NEITZKE: Ignominious.

Q: Taking it from the Scandinavians and all.

NEITZKE: In one respect it might have been better, cleaner, if we'd just steadfastly refused to deploy any troops anywhere in the Balkans, because the manner in which we did deploy the few that we eventually sent only further undercut any U.S. claim - moral, military, or otherwise - to leadership. I recall watching a TV interview of Defense Secretary Perry in mid-1994 in which he was at pains to make clear that the few U.S. troops being deployed would have absolutely nothing to do with peacekeeping; their work was to be purely humanitarian. Yet not too humanitarian. They definitely would not, for example, be exposed to mass graves, a Pentagon spokesman pointed out, lest that subject them to undue "psychological stress." What a contrast this earlier, frankly humiliating period constitutes alongside the forceful, self-confident manner in which our forces did ultimately deploy in implementing Dayton.

Q: You referred to the so-called sanctions regime on Serbia. What did you mean "so-called?" There were sanctions, were there not?

NEITZKE: There were sanctions. And by all accounts, they inflicted hardship on the average Serb and on some of Serbia's neighbors. But they never demonstrably inhibited Belgrade-backed Serb military depredations in Bosnia. And, from the reports I read, sanctions-busting evolved to a very high and profitable art form in Serbia. Despite a lot of to-ing and fro-ing by Western sanctions enforcement monitors, the West, including the U.S., knowingly permitted massive sanctions violations across its southern border with Macedonia. Why? Mainly because we wanted to prop up a very fragile Macedonia but without having to take on the Greeks directly, and their politically potent supporters in the U.S., over Athens' effort to strangle Macedonia at birth because of its name. During some months, according to reports I saw, thousands of railway freight cars and large trucks passed virtually unimpeded over the Serbia-Macedonia border in both directions. And this was happening as the killing in Bosnia continued and as we publicly touted the sanctions regime on Serbia as a strong response.

But let me get back to our earlier discussion...

Q: Yes.

NEITZKE: Our discussion of how far the Pentagon was prepared to go to counter any call for more direct U.S. involvement in Bosnia. The endless debate over Bosnia policy created far and away the dirtiest, most no-holds-barred analytical environment I'd ever worked in. Here's another example. In early January 1993 we, Embassy Zagreb, started getting second-hand reports - including direct ham radio reports via the Mosque in Zagreb, or perhaps it was Merhamet, about extremely dire conditions in the Serb-surrounded Eastern enclave of Zepa. We already knew that Zepa was near the top of both UNHCR's and the Bosnian Government's list of most desperate locales. Our best information was that no aid convoy had ever reached this area, whose population had by then swelled to an estimated 30,000 by the arrival of Muslims from ethnically-cleansed neighboring areas. The reports we saw alleged large and rapidly accelerating numbers of deaths, principally of children, due to severe malnutrition, even starvation. While we had no means of independently evaluating these reports, the conditions they described were consistent with what Stuebner, the DART rep I mentioned earlier, had picked up in Gorazde in late December. I sent in what we had in a front channel cable, appropriately caveated as to sourcing, but calling it an apparent final plea from the largest standing deathwatch in Bosnia, or something close to that. I added that, based I think on what Stuebner had heard, the Muslims in Eastern Bosnia were convinced that only massive air drops could save them.

I sent that report in more out of frustration than in anticipation that it would actually light a fire under anyone - this was the comparatively dead Bush-to-Clinton transition period - but apparently it did; it was read. The subject of how to keep alive the most vulnerable Muslim populations in Bosnia, endangered by bitter winter conditions and the continuing Serbian blockage of relief convoys, was already under consideration in Washington, including the possibility of initiating airdrops to those areas. The JCS had been holding the line against airdrops, but our report apparently helped tip the balance in the other direction, and the JCS went into overdrive to counter it. Two steps they took of which I'm aware were: the redirection of a satellite to photograph Zepa, and EUCOM's dispatching General Jones to Sarajevo to extract from UNPROFOR any information he could regarding convoys to the eastern enclaves, or anything else that could be used to blunt pressures building for U.S. intervention or airdrops. In the event, satellite imagery of Zepa showed a moving vehicle or two and heat emanating from a couple buildings, which the JCS reportedly argued was a clear indication that the starvation reports were unfounded. And from Sarajevo...

Q: And you know this how? How did you know this was the Joint Chiefs specifically, and what they were doing, the satellite and all?

NEITZKE: The JCS representative on a high-profile U.S. relief survey mission that came out in early 1993 told me, accused me actually, that my report had forced them to redirect a satellite, and I saw the report of what the satellite had picked up. But before I get to what UNHCR actually found in Zepa when they finally got in, let me tell you what General Jones found out in Sarajevo. And here too, before you ask, I know what he reported because a thoroughly disgusted member of his team privately briefed us and I saw a copy of Jones' close-hold brief to EUCOM on the results of his Sarajevo meetings. His report said nearly all one needed to know about the extent to which senior U.S. military had swallowed hook, line, and sinker UNPROFOR's pox-on-all-their-houses perspective. More to the point, Jones' report indicated clearly how far the JCS were prepared to go to win the Bosnia information war, or disinformation war. It said, most egregiously, that relief convoys were in fact getting into the eastern enclaves, including Zepa, and that there was no evidence of starvation there.

Despite our differences, I had respected Jones and I was disappointed that he'd become an even larger part, indeed the focal point, of the JCS' determined disinformation effort, in this case, regarding relief convoys to the desperate eastern enclaves. The officer who briefed us, who had accompanied Jones to Sarajevo, told us how his phony convoy report had been concocted. Amid a strange joviality, he said, UN personnel had lightheartedly responded to Jones' query about convoys to the affected enclaves, that, "sure, that's on our list for every Tuesday," or words very close to that. The UN didn't want the U.S. military to get involved any more than the JCS wanted us to get involved, hence the reported semi- conspiratorial atmosphere at the meeting. On the basis of this UN wink-and-nod, Jones reported to his superiors, and they to Powell, that the convoys were getting in, including to Zepa, although everyone in that briefing, we were told, knew that they were not. But Jones didn't stop there. He went on to provide chapter and verse of what I earlier referred to as the virtual Stockholm Syndrome perspective of the UN, especially in Sarajevo.

Q: Meaning what? Stockholm syndrome? You have mentioned this a number of times.

NEITZKE: The term is derived from a famous hostage case in Stockholm. In essence, some persons held hostage in time take on the perspective of their captors, identifying with them, seeing outsiders, even potential rescuers, as threats to their well being. So, with Serbian artillery shelling Sarajevo, with Serbian snipers picking off civilians, with Serbs in control of virtually all routes into the city and able to close the airport at will, whom did UN Sarajevo consistently portray as the worst of the bad guys? The Muslims, of course. In UN eyes, the Muslims were not the principal victims of the Serbian siege, they were the principal culprits; they even shelled themselves to curry Western sympathy. I remember later seeing a U.S. military cable - a classic, from SHAPE I believe - that baldly declared that Sarajevo was not, after all, a city under siege but simply a venue for "exchanges of fire between conflicting parties," of which the duplicitous Muslims were obviously more guilty. We passed that one around. Utterly laughable, but for the tragic fact that it represented what a lot of the U.S. military apparently thought and were determined to have others think.

In his report, Jones gave full credit to the recurring UN charge that Muslims were orchestrating a sophisticated PR campaign to dupe the Western press, playing on our sensitivities with reports of starvation, that the Muslims were nearly as guilty as the other parties of mass murder, rape, and other atrocities, and that it was the Muslims who were shelling UNPROFOR to try to make the Serbs look bad, that the Muslims were responsible for every UNPROFOR casualty, every one. As for the possibility of airlifts to feed the eastern enclaves, Jones reported the UN's recommendation against doing so except under permissive conditions. Permissive conditions meant that the Serbs would have to be fully on board; so they wouldn't shoot surface-to-air missiles at the flights.

Q: Well, could you not have challenged Jones on his report?

NEITZKE: Not without getting our source canned, but later I did challenge most of what he'd said in his report.

Now two things. First, when a UNHCR convoy, with UNPROFOR escort, did push its way into Zepa, what they found - in a very brief, almost drop-and-run visit - were in fact horrible conditions - many fresh graves, people eating bread made partly of sawdust, virtually no medical supplies, and a large, desperate, weakened, panic-stricken population. Actual starvation? The UN claimed not, but in light of what they actually saw, they didn't push the point. What I learned as an aside from this incident is that it can be all but impossible to prove death by starvation. Technically, one doesn't starve to death; rather, one's severely malnourished, weakened body, facing severe winter conditions, little food, and no medicine, in time simply succumbs to any of a host of other problems.

Secondly, when, rather than take on the Serbs directly and force through convoys, we opted in late February 1993 to begin airdrops into the eastern enclaves, we did so under Kafkaesque restraints. This was part of Operation Provide Promise. Most such U.S. flights - several countries eventually participated - took off from Rhein-Main in Germany, but not, in most instances, before Serbs - on the spot, invited there by us - had inspected the pallets, the items to be dropped, eliminating anything and everything which in their opinion did not constitute humanitarian relief, such as sleeping bags and plastic sheeting, for example, to help keep people from freezing to death. Just think about that. The Serbs are doing all they can to strangle the Eastern Muslim enclaves, and here Serbs are dictating to the U.S. military, on a U.S. military base, what we may and may not drop to their beleaguered victims. And we bless the whole exercise. And then when we actually made the drops, we do so from 15,000 or so feet rather than the preferred 10,000 or lower, because we still fear that the Serbs might try to bring down our C-130s. Dropping from that altitude in frequent high wind conditions - often at night - caused many of the drops to drift far from their target areas, and endangered the desperate Muslims who ran out to get the stuff, MREs mainly, sometimes under Serbian fire. Again, I have nothing but praise for the men and women who flew these flights; they were not easy, and the food that they were able to deliver on target, despite the constraints, saved lives. But this was not a glorious chapter at the command level.

Q: Well, why was there such a fear of the Serbs? Was it not at all justified? And were there not in fact threats also from the Croatian side, and even the Muslims, I mean, Bosnia was a very dangerous place, was it not?

NEITZKE: There are several aspects to that. And they're critical in understanding both what was going on in Bosnia and Washington's reaction to it. When it became clear that Yugoslavia was going to come apart, with the first serious fighting and substantial casualties in the Croatian war, in mid-1991, the Bush Administration, though loath to intervene under any circumstances, began to do contingency planning. And they didn't like what they saw.Among the "Yugo hands" at State as well as Pentagon planners, it was axiomatic that the Serbs could not be stopped, let alone rolled back, merely by air strikes. Fighting on their own mountainous terrain, Partisan-style if necessary, they might prove a very difficult adversary. Only the intervention of a large, U.S.-led ground force might suffice, and casualties could be high. Clearly, they feared an escalatory ladder of actions that could lead to a quagmire.

Who would have led the Bush Administration to that assessment of Serbian strength and determination? Who would have provided their most authoritative reading of the Serbs? Of how hard they'd fight and how hard it would be to force them to the table? My guess would be Eagleburger, and perhaps Scowcroft, old Belgrade colleagues. Eagleburger was, unquestionably, de facto dean of State's Yugo hands. And when he stated, as I assume he would have, with conviction and emotion, that this is what you'll face if you go in, this is how hard the Serbs will fight, this is how hard it will be to defeat them, there would have been nobody in the government able credibly to challenge him.

Eagleburger used to say, including to the media, what if the U.S. did try thus and such to stop the fighting and it didn't work, then what? We'd have to escalate. And where would it all end? I understand, from a Kissingerian, realpolitik perspective, that great powers on ill-considered moral crusades can do much harm to themselves and others. But I always favored a different answer to Eagleburger's quandary, that at least you'd have tried, at least you wouldn't have stood by, our nation's highest recognized authority on Yugoslavia, cynically dissembling amid a prolonged genocidal Serbian rampage.

Q: Well now let us take this head on. You keep going back to Larry Eagleburger's role in all of this. Obviously you think he screwed up. But are you saying that he deliberately lied about what was going on in Bosnia, about the genocide?

NEITZKE: I can't prove precisely what Eagleburger knew at any given time. But his various statements, describing the death camps as merely unpleasant conditions, saying there was nothing the U.S. could do until "these people tired of killing one another," delivering a blatantly Serbo-philic speech to the London Conference, and insisting that the Croats' hands were as dirty as the Serbs' all mocked what was happening in Bosnia at the time that he made them. I think he knew essentially what was going on. Certainly he knew more than he was comfortable knowing. One of his aides told me that early on - around the time of Slovenia's breakaway - Eagleburger quashed his own impulse for the U.S. to get more involved when he was told categorically by Baker that U.S. intervention was out of the question. As Baker famously said, "we don't have a dog in that fight;" the U.S. would stay out no matter what. But Eagleburger didn't just march out and defend the Bush-Baker decision like a good soldier, he clearly relished the role. That was obvious in how tenaciously he went about dampening the early public outcry for something to be done to stop the killing. Some of this was just bizarre. You may remember his claim that if we couldn't quell the violence in Los Angeles, referring to the Rodney King riots, then there was little hope of our doing much about Bosnia. And he had to have played a role in that long, critically attention-diverting Panic-Scanlan charade in Belgrade. Provable lies or not, the totality of Eagleburger's actions and public statements during this period were, well, ...

Q: A disappointment?

NEITZKE: No. They were a disgrace, amid an otherwise remarkable career. And instead of later expressing regret or remorse about the role he'd played on Bosnia - when his errors of analysis and judgment had become crystal clear - Eagleburger stubbornly kept up the fight. When the Clinton Administration finally did bomb Belgrade over Kosovo, for example, there was Larry Eagleburger protesting that the move smacked of a "racist" approach to intervention. No apparent shame whatsoever. Yet that bombing was at least partly a consequence of Eagleburger's own earlier efforts to limit and control information about Serbian crimes in Bosnia that might have further galvanized public opinion behind getting tough with Milosevic early on - a move that would not have left even educated Serbs wondering eight years later why the world had "suddenly" turned on them.

Q: Okay, then getting back.

NEITZKE: I was saying how wildly off the mark our Yugo experts' analysis of Serb strength and fortitude was. From the hundreds of eye-witness victim testimonies that I saw, it was clear that the Serbs doing most of the killing in Bosnia were not the giant, hardened, fight-to-the-death Partisan warriors of Balkan myth and Partisan lore. Instead, cast together with JNA regulars and their Bosnian Serb henchmen were an amalgam of common criminals, punk wannabe gang-leaders, and former soccer fan clubs morphed into doped up weekend rape and execution squads. Even Karadzic later remarked, I believe, that 5,000 American troops on the ground early on would have caused them to stop.

Q: This is the thing that struck me at the time. It sounded like a bunch of, well, a bunch of guys with big beer bellies sitting around with artillery going after people who couldn't defend themselves.

NEITZKE: Most of these were very nasty types, not courageous, but capable of inflicting horrific brutalities on innocent people. One reason the Serbs suffered very few military casualties in Bosnia were the consistently cowardly tactics they employed - heavily shelling a village from afar, traumatizing the residents. Then they would enter the village or town and start rounding people up. Then, to focus everyone's attention, they might behead a few community leaders on the doorstep of their homes, or rape to death a young girl or two in front of her siblings, parents, and townsfolk in the local square. The point was to desecrate the place, so that the people, once banished, would never wish to go back. And then the men and boys would be marched or trucked off to concentration camps where many of them would be starved, sadistically tortured, and killed, and the women and older girls would be hauled off to holding facilities where they were likely to be gang raped. In late 1992 the EC, I believe, sent out a team that estimated there had been some 20,000 rape victims by that point. And after the killing, raping, and roundups were over, the Serb looters would show up, stealing nearly everything removable, from toilets to wiring to doorknobs.

Q: Okay. But the Croats too...I mean I find it difficult to believe that the Croats, that this particular leopard had completely changed its spots from World War II. I assume there was some nastiness on the part of the Croats also.

NEITZKE: As I think I noted earlier, there were also some nasty Croatian elements - I'm thinking here especially of HOS and Paraga's gang - but some in the HVO too, and Croats did commit atrocities on a number of occasions. For example, in April 1993, in the Lasva Valley, in Vitez, in Ahmici and other villages, and in October 1993, in Stupni Do, Bosnian Croat forces committed crimes as heinous and unforgivable as nearly anything - except Srebrenica - that Serbs did, albeit on a vastly smaller scale. We'll get to what happened between the Bosnian Croats and Muslims in 1993 in a moment. But keep in mind the key finding of the comprehensive CIA study: Serbs did at least 90 percent of the killing, raping, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. And that figure was pre-Srebrenica. This while Croatia was inundated with hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslim refugees, and while hundreds of thousands more sheltered in Bosnian Croat-held territory in Bosnia.

As potential threats to any would-be Western military peace-making forces, the Serbs, although a genuine threat, were vastly overrated, and the Croats, even most of the Bosnian Croats, were far more likely to be welcoming than threatening.

Yet this very clear distinction was for a long time all but lost on both our military and UN commanders and officers. There was a peculiar tendency by the UN and Western uniformed military in Bosnia to show, if not quite comradely respect, at least undue deference to Serbian officers. This was separate from the Stockholm Syndrome aspect. One obvious reason is that some of the Serb officers looked and acted the part. There was, I was told, a sense that you could deal with them officer to officer, in contrast to some of the less-disciplined, occasionally more ragtag looking Bosnian Croat and Muslim military leaders. As I mentioned earlier, no one embodied this sentiment more clearly that the initial UNPROFOR Sarajevo Commander, Canadian General Lewis MacKenzie. MacKenzie dealt often with Serbian officers, reportedly showing them great deference, placed most of the blame for Sarajevo's situation on the Muslims rather than their Serb encirclers, said as late as August of 1992 that he knew nothing of any death camps, said he thought the international media were part of a sophisticated effort to exaggerate such atrocities as there were, was invited repeatedly to testify before the U.S. Congress, and, as I noted earlier, on leaving the Balkans, embarked on a paid speaking tour for Serb Net, a pro-Belgrade organization.

Even U.S. officers occasionally succumbed to the professional attraction of dealing officer-to-officer with the Serbs, including with blood-on-their-hands Serbian war criminals. As late as August 1994, for example, I along with most other Western diplomats in the region was dumbfounded to learn that General Wesley Clark...

Q: And future Presidential candidate.

NEITZKE: Clark, then JCS Director of Strategy, Plans, and Policy, had traveled deep into Serb-cleansed territory to meet, over State Department objection, with no less a war criminal than Ratko Mladic, the Serbian General - still on the run - who engineered the Bosnian genocide. In what a straight faced Pentagon flag officer spokesman termed a customary feature of such "military-to-military meetings," Clark was photographed accepting from a beaming Mladic a hat, pistol, and bottle of brandy. When a U.S. diplomat in the press the next day accurately likened the meeting to "cavorting with Hermann Goering," posts in the area were all quickly told by the Department to shut up about it, since Clark, it turned out, was an Arkansas, Rhodes Scholar friend of the Clintons. Clark later said he'd been misled into meeting with Mladic. That may be true, but those misleading him either knew better or, more likely, had fallen totally for the UN-propagated myth that all sides were equally guilty and that Serb officers in Bosnia were more like uniformed officers anywhere; they were disciplined; you could deal with them.

Apart from deference to Serb officers, however, there was this tendency I've alluded to, especially early on, for U.S. military visitors to the area to view all sides as almost indistinguishably threatening to any forces the U.S. might eventually decide to send in. This mindset led to a bizarre incident near the Split Airport in March 1993, in response to which I sent out another sharp front channel protest, this time to EUCOM, I think. Without anyone's notifying the Embassy, a U.S. Naval ship off the coast had sought and obtained permission from local Split Airport authorities to land a few men for a brief Search and Rescue practice drill. What they then proceeded to do, however, was to land way more than a few armed troops and essentially secure all of Split Airport. We got a call from Defense Minister Susak, I believe, a guy who would do pretty much anything for us that we asked - if we asked him - wondering just what the hell we thought we were doing around Split Airport. So I sent my cable calling the incident an outrageous violation of Croatian sovereignty. Then I took the opportunity to blast a U.S. military mindset so out of touch with Balkan ground truth that it apparently couldn't differentiate between potential threats to U.S. forces. I suggested that the Public Relations and PSYOPS strategy the U.S. military had insisted upon for Operation Provide Promise - that is, out of concern for Serbian sensibilities to publicly portray all sides as equally threatening to our airdrops, a ludicrous proposition - was being badly confused with the reality of the situation in Bosnia, which was, I said over and over, that the Serbs were incomparably more hostile to the prospect of U.S. intervention than the Croats were and incomparably more guilty of raping, killing, and ethnic cleansing.

That cable too was read in Washington and EUCOM, and I got a call shortly thereafter from General Jones asking - for the record, I suppose, since he knew me fairly well by then - why I had reacted so strongly, as if that weren't obvious. But he acknowledged that the Split SAR exercise had been a mistake.

Again, it's interesting to contrast that U.S. military mindset, the one that prevailed in 1992 and 1993, with where we ended up in 1995, looking at the then beefed-up Croatian forces in a sense as a proxy in pushing back the Serbs in Bosnia. That warming military-to-military relationship would ultimately see Secretary of Defense Perry deliver an amazingly effusive eulogy at Defense Minister Susak's 1998 funeral. The transformation was profound.

Q: Okay, well, you have provided, you have laid out some serious charges and, I must say, some compelling evidence to back them up. Is there anything else you want to say about the U.S. military at this point before we move on. I mean, I want to get back to Croatia...

NEITZKE: There's just one more point I'd like to make here. I don't cut U.S. military leaders any slack at all for their dissembling, foot-dragging, and use of every other tactic they could find to keep us on the sidelines during the worst of the Bosnian genocide in 1992. But in doing so, in that period, they marched in lock step with the civilian side of the Administration, with Bush, Baker, Eagleburger, Scowcroft, and others.

I think a different framework, or metric, as they would say, for judging U.S. military leaders needs to be applied once the Clinton team came in. I'm not excusing the stance senior military leaders took in the new Administration - Powell was still CJCS and still dug in up to his eyeballs in opposition to deeper U.S. involvement in Bosnia.

Q: But it was not just General Powell, as you said...

NEITZKE: Not at all. Opposition in the military was wide and deep. Just as an aside, I remember once briefing visiting Army Chief of Staff Sullivan out at the MASH at Zagreb Airport, describing the complex of death camps, the one-sidedness of the carnage, what I saw as our interests in the conflict, how most of our NATO Allies were there and badly floundering under UN leadership, the whole thing, I laid it all out. For a long time he just looked at me, as though to say, or so I thought, I hear you, I feel for your having to deal with this mess, but there is literally nothing you could tell me that would alter my opposition to our getting more involved here. Another time I heard a U.S. Army colonel - he was accompanying a U.S. UN Association group, in a Zagreb meeting with Croats and Western Europeans present - stand up and pronounce that even the prevention of 20,000 rapes in Bosnia wouldn't have been worth endangering the life of one American soldier. It was embarrassingly clear that he'd gotten the memo. So, yes, although Powell was the most formidable U.S. military opponent of intervention, he was hardly alone.

But getting back to the early Clinton White House, some were reportedly so disrespectful toward the military, toward their professional concerns and even the military as an institution, that you have to ask yourself honestly whether you, if you were a commander, would want to risk your soldiers' lives in the Balkans or elsewhere under Clinton's leadership. Then, of course, Clinton's early decision on gays in the military alienated senior officers even more. So, despite then UN Permanent Representative Madeleine Albright's famous NSC challenge to Powell, "What's our army for then," I could understand their aversion to going into Bosnia at that point under Clinton's shaky leadership. But did that justify their, in effect, lying about genocide, distorting Bosnian ground truth, endlessly regurgitating UNPROFOR inanities, to counter pressures on the U.S. to intervene? I don't think so; you have to draw the line somewhere; you don't lie about genocide. In any event, the realization that senior U.S. military officers felt profoundly alienated from the Clinton Administration, and that Clinton had no intention of making good on his campaign pledge to get tough with the Serbs, deepened the already acute frustration one felt on the ground in the former Yugoslavia as the tragedy continued.

Q: Just to clarify, you did or did not want the U.S. military to intervene, I mean even after President Clinton came in, because it sounded as though that was what you were advocating, intervention?

NEITZKE: I wanted the administration, both administrations, civilian and military sides, to stop trying deliberately to confuse, to stop lying to the American people about what was going on in the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia especially. And while I thought it extremely shortsighted for the U.S. to stand aside while most of the rest of NATO sent forces into Bosnia in the fall of 1992 under UN auspices, I never advocated or thought necessary a massive U.S. ground force. Even a small U.S. force, comparable to what the Brits and French sent in, would have transformed the mission from the outset. Under the Powell Doctrine, of course, we don't do token troop presences. But had we been willing in the late summer and fall of 1992 to commit a U.S. contingent to UNPROFOR, one way or another the situation would quickly have come to a head. We would have brought it to a head. With U.S. soldiers at risk, we would not have tolerated that flaccid mess of a command structure. More likely, if we'd been willing to consider going in early, we'd have insisted up front on a U.S.-led NATO force, which - as even Karadzic attests - needn't have been all that massive. And the Bosnians would have been spared three years of UNPROFOR dithering, and worse. Underlying that preference was my view that there was a good deal less to the Serbs than met the eye and that air strikes, including against Serbia itself, could play a critical role in bringing them to heel, forcing them to the negotiating table. Admittedly, in January 1993, on troop deployments and other options, Clinton faced tougher choices than Bush had in the summer of 1992. Still, I hoped that on Bosnia Clinton would be as good as his word. Few of us realized then just how feckless his Administration would prove to be early on. I think some in our military saw all of that earlier and, while they'd been opposed to going into Bosnia all along, their opposition was redoubled by Clinton's early missteps.

Q: Okay. I see.

NEITZKE: If I could add just one other point here, I think it's important, about a power shift toward the Pentagon under Clinton. Through the end of the Bush Administration, Eagleburger, as I mentioned, with Scowcroft, would typically have been deferred to in weighing the Serbs' political will, what kind of force it might take to bring them to heel. Powell and senior Pentagon officials would have found little in Eagleburger's analysis to disagree with. But when Eagleburger and Scowcroft left, and in light of Clinton's weak standing with the military, and Christopher's early souring on Bosnia, the recognized analytical authority on this issue changed. The Clinton team began deferring almost reflexively to Powell and the Pentagon on the question of what it would take to break the Serbs' will, or at least get them to the table. And within the Pentagon, this issue would typically be worked by planners and analysts with little or no Balkan experience. They nearly always presumed unyielding Serb political will unless confronted with a Western ground force so large that Clinton would never agree to it.

But the larger question here is key. When the U.S. is contemplating military engagement, it now seems to fall naturally to the Pentagon to assess what kind of force will it will take to break an adversary's will. But why? This is a political analytical judgment at least as much as a military one. It's something for which State and CIA will likely have at least as good a feel as the Pentagon. I understand that with "their" men's lives on the line, the Pentagon won't easily yield to State or the Agency on this judgment. But the balance now has swung very heavily toward the Pentagon. And on Bosnia it did so with the incoming Clinton Administration. They were afraid to challenge the generals on virtually any front, except briefly on the treatment of gays. And that extreme reticence explains some of the policy fumbling and muddling that took place on this issue until the summer of 1995.

As time went on, however, into late 1994 and 1995, the U.S. military itself, even if not always self-consciously from the top down, began to see the handwriting on the wall, the eventual inevitability of their being drawn in in some substantial fashion. And, working with the Agency, they were gradually coming up to speed on what they would need to know when that time came, on the capabilities they might want to have. The Predator and pre-Predator test reconnaissance missions over Bosnia that were being run quietly from, I believe it was Krk Island, off Croatia's coast, were one element of that. And the sophistication of their threat analysis began to improve.

Q: Just a minute. These are the Predators now being used in the Middle East and Afghanistan?

NEITZKE: An earlier version. They were experimenting with them, flying them over Bosnia and producing real time video. They're a very dangerous weapon, and not just for taking out one's enemy at little risk. If a nation has this in its arsenal, it could be nearly impossible next time to say that we can't get any real time intel about, say, concentration camps and mass murders. Just send a few Predators over the area in question. It could enormously complicate deniability.

Q: Well what about the Europeans? How would you rate their performance overall?

NEITZKE: I think we covered part of that earlier. Generally terrible, but at least they tried, at least they showed up. So did the Canadians. Until Dayton and late 1995, ours was the most glaring absence. But even before UNPROFOR's crippling inadequacies became apparent, it had long been clear that the Europeans were not up to the task. This should not have surprised us; there was no basis for believing that they could do this on their own, no historical precedent. Their assertion of a prerogative to handle this situation had all but evaporated in 1992. By then no one was in charge, no Western military force at least.

Q: Well you say they were not up to doing this. I mean, looking at it as a practical thing, here are powers, Germany, France, Britain, Italy, they certainly had a huge array of military might, and they were smart people. Was it a matter of will or what?

NEITZKE: Political will was sorely lacking. But they did have substantial military forces, except for the Germans, who were not there for understandable historical reasons. What they lacked most critically is any prior collective military engagement which might have helped them resolve some of the questions of mutual trust and confidence that plagued even the more formidable European forces in UNPROFOR. And the UN itself, Akashi most notably, but the whole UN chain of command, made effective military action, even by the Europeans, all but impossible. The French contingent was certainly capable of executing a forceful military action, as were the Brits, as were some others. But each distrusted the UN chain of command and routinely sought guidance and confirmation from their own capital before attempting anything. Each had its own interests in the former Yugoslavia and was considering options to safeguard its own forces should things turn truly ugly and they have to get out quickly. Was the French public, even concerned as it was about the humanitarian catastrophe, prepared to accept French casualties as the result of decisions made by, say, British officers, let alone by a UN civilian? Maybe a few, but not many.

Now you could say that none of this was our fault, that we had no moral, legal, or political obligation to be there, let alone to lead. But you cannot say, looking at history, that the Europeans' behavior was surprising. There was no basis for believing that they were going to shed much blood, jointly, in this kind of endeavor, in the absence of the U.S.

Q: You know, it keeps coming back to what many of our colleagues have observed in various situations, that like it or not, the United States is the indispensable country.

NEITZKE: That was proven by our three-year absence in Bosnia.

Q: Okay, let us turn back to the Embassy, to your role in running that. You were Charge, or chief of mission, I guess, for quite a long period. How did that come about?

NEITZKE: After we established formal diplomatic relations with the Croats and opened the Embassy in late August 1992, the Bush White House, reportedly hoping to curry favor with Eastern European ethnic voters, nominated a Croatian-American, Mara Letica, to be Ambassador in Zagreb. I'm not sure whether her papers ever got to the Hill, however, before Congress adjourned for its long campaign recess. I heard at the time that the nomination may have been slow-tracked in State, that there was opposition to sending a non-professional out at that point. So there may have been some foot-dragging. With Bush's loss, it became moot; the nomination was dead. In January, the new Administration had a full plate of more urgent business and, for that matter, more senior ambassadorial appointments to make. It was late spring 1993 before they got around to nominating Galbraith as Ambassador. And, although Peter's friends on the Foreign Relations Committee rushed through his papers, his hearing, and confirmation, it wasn't until the very end of June that Peter arrived.

Q: We'll talk about Ambassador Galbraith's arrival later. First I would like you to talk a little more about how the new Administration handled the Yugoslav problems and how the sides there reacted to the new Administration. How did the Croats react, for example?

NEITZKE: Clinton had strongly attacked Bush for his failure to take on the Serbs, to halt the killing in Bosnia. So hopes were high after the election that he meant what he'd said. The Croats stood back, as did the Muslims, and to a certain extent, even the Serbs, watching to see what the new administration would bring. Surely the timidity and occasional sloppiness that had characterized the previous 18 months of U.S. Balkan policy would give way to something more forceful and coherent. In retrospect, it seems hopelessly naï¿½ve to have believed that. I understand that the Clinton team did ask for a fresh reading from the intelligence community on what it might be possible to do short of full-scale intervention. I heard that Lake, for example, asked the community specifically for a study of the feasibility of liberating one or more of the death camps. Powell alone probably could have blocked that, but there was another problem. It would take months before new officials were confirmed and in place in all the critical subcabinet intelligence and national security policy jobs. In the meantime, the fresh look Lake wanted would come from holdover, mid-senior level career officials who had been defending our limited engagement policy and its flawed analytical underpinnings. Needless to say, they concluded that little could be done at even remotely acceptable risk.

Add to that the widely-reported disarray in the early Clinton White House, the narrowness of Clinton's victory, and Clinton's strong inclination to spend his limited political capital on domestic initiatives. It soon became clear that we weren't going to get a more potent policy on the Balkans and that it might even get worse. I recall reading that State Department Under Secretary for Political Affairs Peter Tarnoff told Elie Wiesel in April 1993 that failure in Bosnia would destroy the Clinton presidency; the Democratic Party constituted too fragile a coalition to risk it. I also recall reading that Hillary Clinton advised her husband that taking on Bosnia could cost them health care reform and argued strongly against it. Any lingering doubts were resolved by Secretary of State Christopher's disastrous trip to Europe early in the Administration aimed at selling the Europeans on "lift and strike," that is, lift the arms embargo on the Muslims and strike the Serbs from the air.

Q: Well it was considered at the time that we were keeping the Bosnians, the Muslims, from protecting themselves while the Serbs had an abundance of arms.

NEITZKE: That's correct. But Christopher hit a brick wall. Not only did Clinton - who grew nervous, or so it was said, after reading Kaplan's Balkan Ghosts - pull the rug a bit out from under Christopher in mid-trip, but the Europeans already had men on the ground in Bosnia, some in vulnerable situations. It was all well and good for America, refusing to send troops of its own, to say we'd like to start dropping bombs from 15,000 feet. We saw in 1995 what that initially led to; the Serbs took UNPROFOR troops hostage, tied some of them to bridges, gun emplacements, anywhere where they'd likely be among the first to die from any bombs we dropped. So in the spring of 1993 Christopher's lift-and-strike proposal got a resounding "hell no" from the Europeans. Then Clinton reacted huffily, saying well, I tried, I just couldn't persuade the Europeans, completely ignoring the elephant in the room of our own refusal to send troops, to lead where it mattered.

That episode not only soured Christopher on Bosnia pretty much for the duration - it was, as I mentioned, his "problem from hell" - it also led directly to the toothless, ultimately calamitous "Safe Areas" agreement which provided largely fictitious UN protection for the remaining six largest concentrations of Muslims in Bosnia. You saw the last vestige of that policy copout when the Dutch "peacekeepers" in Srebrenica lamely surrendered to the Serbs in the summer of 1995, allowing them to haul some 8,000 men and boys off to be slaughtered. Now let me go back and say something about how the Croats, how Tudjman, was reading all of this.

Q: Please.

NEITZKE: Tudjman had come a long way in 1992, or so it seemed, from the erratic, ultra nationalist greedily eyeing Bosnia that Warren Zimmerman thought he was dealing with, to the more measured and reserved man I found on my arrival, to the Tudjman as self-perceived statesman following the London Conference of August 1992, where he had first tasted international respectability - and liked it. By the end of the year, with a quarter of Croatia still in Serbian hands and an unstoppable tide of Bosnian Muslim refugees swamping parts of the country, Tudjman found himself under increasing pressure - particularly from restive Croatian communities displaced from the UNPAs - to begin pushing back. He believed that the longer the Serbs' occupation of the UNPAs went unchallenged, the more likely it was that the UNPAs, or at least large parts of them, would never be fully integrated into Croatia.

Tudjman too had noted Clinton's tough campaign rhetoric on Bosnia. And with Clinton's victory, Tudjman hoped for a change in U.S. policy. But, as all the signals out of the early Clinton Administration pointed to continued U.S. reluctance to get involved, Tudjman was quicker than many to see that those hopes were misplaced; Croatia was going to have to take the initiative. And, by late 1992-early 1993, it was better prepared militarily to do so.

Q: So what did Tudjman do, I mean about these UN areas?

NEITZKE: The four UNPAs constituted the quarter or so of Croatian territory, or territory that Croatia considered theirs, that was seized and occupied by Belgrade-backed Serbs in the Croatia War. What to do with them, especially after the fighting there had been largely halted, was an issue on which the civilian side of UNPROFOR had the lead, at least for a time. That was headed by Cedric Thornberry, an earnest and interesting, and ultimately very frustrated, guy. Thornberry's view, and that of UNPROFOR, and technically it could be argued, that of the international community, was that the UNPAS were not integral parts of the Croatia that we and many other nations had recognized by the spring of 1992, that their status was unresolved pending final negotiations between Zagreb and Knin, the so-called capital of the Krajina Serbs. Thornberry's job, against huge odds, was to bridge this gap while helping see to the well being of those who remained in the UNPAs, nearly all Serbs except for a few tiny, surrounded enclaves of Croats, mixed-marriage families, and others.

Thornberry made no bones of the fact that he saw the UNPA Serbs as the underdogs, the past, current, and likely future victims of an ultranationalist Zagreb regime.

Q: Well, were they not, was that an inaccurate assessment?

NEITZKE: At a minimum, it was way overdone. Serbian leaders in Belgrade and in the JNA had anticipated early on that if Yugoslavia came apart Serb-dominant areas in Croatia would need help to remain in Yugoslavia, in effect in a Greater Serbia. These traditionally Serb-dominant areas in Croatia included large parts of Sectors North and South, and smaller parts of Sectors East and West, as the four UNPAs, respectively, were designated. Small-scale fighting for control of these areas broke out long before Croatia formally declared its independence. Belgrade had been shipping arms and other military supplies to the Krajina Serbs for some time. And the Croats in these areas had similarly been mobilizing. During the six months or so of the most intense fighting in the Croatian war, the latter half of 1991, all but a few Croats fled these areas, remaining for several years in Displaced Persons camps around Zagreb, living pretty dismally. But all was far from well with the Krajina Serbs too. They found themselves even more isolated, cut off from the nearby Croatian communities with which they had traditionally traded and at the end of a very long supply line from Belgrade. Life in much of the Krajina at that tense time was truly grim. I later visited there. Many of these people were living in wretched conditions. And as Croatia became better and better armed, a deep sense of gloom and foreboding settled over the place, notwithstanding occasional bombastic rhetoric from Krajina Serb leaders.

Thornberry had UNPROFOR civilian teams living in the UNPAs, and many became very sympathetic to the Krajina Serbs' cause, seeing Zagreb as a huge threat. And Thornberry's own attitude consistently reflected that sympathy. As he got nowhere fast in his efforts to resolve the status of the UNPAs through negotiations, he heightened his appeals to the local representatives of Western governments, including me, to put pressure on Croatia.

Throughout this period, the latter part of 1992 and early 1993, there were provocations on both sides of the tenuous Krajina Serb-Croatia line, both sides probing the other for local advantage. By early 1993, however, Tudjman was ready to bring things to a head, by upping the ante with the first credible threat of a Croatian military move to liberate UNPA territory. In January 1993, for example, the Croatian army moved near Maslenica to open a secure land corridor to Dalmatia.

Q: How did you, how did the U.S., react to that threat?

NEITZKE: The European bureau at State reacted with near-hysteria. This was still very early in the Clinton Administration, but they had already figured out that they didn't want the Croats stirring things up, rekindling another hot front, as it were. So there were threats from Washington of sanctions against Croatia. Merely for reporting why the Croats said they had undertaken the move, I got another warning from EUR. They didn't want to know why; they didn't care why; they wanted the problem to go away. That was about the same time I got yet another threatening call from EUR, from the East European affairs office, this one suggesting that our whole effort to report atrocities in Bosnia was aimed less at documenting human rights abuses than at forcing the Administration's hand. They suggested that henceforth I just send in the raw data, sort of field reports, and not in widely-distributed, finished, cable form. Not very respectfully, I'm afraid, I declined.

The new administration was already tilting toward a pox-on-all-their-houses rationale for non-engagement, and a get-tough action against the Croats would have comported well with that. To this day I don't think most Croats know how close their country came on several occasions to getting slapped with sanctions. And there were still a lot of career Bush Administration holdovers around who would gladly have clamped sanctions on Croatia because of what they were convinced Croatia was doing in Bosnia. Serbia, of course, was already under the leaky sanctions regime that I discussed earlier. I delivered that unwelcome message to Tudjman, about the threat of sanctions. His response was, essentially, what would you have me do, how long must we wait, I have the displaced persons on my back, this is sovereign Croatian territory being held illegally through the long hand of Belgrade, and UNPROFOR and the international community just dawdle.

What happened in short order surprised me but stunned Thornberry. We flipped. The UN Security Council in March 1993, at the strong urging of the United States, if indeed it wasn't our initiative, adopted a resolution, 815 I believe, summarily declaring the UNPAs, all of them, to be integral parts of Croatia. That was it. The matter over which Thornberry had labored so hard and with such frustration was resolved. Tudjman, with this victory to point to, this tangible backing by the international community of Croatia's right to reintegrate all UNPA territory, was temporarily mollified. I don't think Thornberry ever recovered.

What this episode signaled to me was that Washington - which knew well the legal merits of the UNPA issue - was so determined to keep the lid on at least one Balkan problem that they were willing to go from threatening sanctions on Zagreb to endorsing the Croatian position nearly in the blink of an eye. This was a dance that would be repeated several times in the following two years - Tudjman saber-rattling and threatening to move if the international community didn't do something to get him back the UNPAs - and we or the UN giving him enough, just enough, to get him to stand down for awhile. Ultimately, in May 1995, the game was over; the Croatian military moved in and took over Sector West and then in the summer, in an operation it called Balkan Storm - an allusion to Desert Storm - the Croats retook Sectors North and South. We should talk about that later.

Q: How did you rate Tudjman's diplomacy in all of this, this dance you called it?

NEITZKE: Tudjman's decisions and actions when the chips were down did not, let's say, jibe with the caricature in Zimmerman's, and the CIA's, bio notes of a year earlier. He may not have been a master tactician, but he was plenty able. He read the situation correctly, took major but prudent risks, and in the end got most of what he wanted. He certainly read us right, what he could and couldn't get away with. I spent a fair amount of time with him and I thought I understood him about as well as anyone outside his inner circle. It's clear that at times he was making things up as he went along, getting conflicting advice from subordinates, and keeping his own counsel. His decision-making seemed more like that of a general, which he had earlier been, than a politician-President. You can say and think what you will about Tudjman - and many do, and a lot of it, especially from his political adversaries in Croatia and from Serbia and its sympathizers, is pretty vile - but Tudjman deftly steered the young and fragile Croatian state through some very dangerous waters.

Where Tudjman very nearly got it very wrong, however, was in Bosnia in 1993. And that, I believe, came about for a couple of reasons. The Bosnian Croats had generally - I say generally, not everywhere, Prozor in the late autumn stands out - behaved themselves in 1992. But by early 1993, waves of mainly Bosnian Muslims fleeing the largely unchecked Serbian onslaught were seriously undermining what had always been a tenuous Croat-Muslim balance in various parts of the country, including the southeast. Earlier Croat-Muslim cooperation in certain areas further north had been replaced by open friction and occasional fighting in south-central and south-eastern areas. Nearly always it was the Croats who were taking it to the Muslims. A lot of this fighting was spontaneous, loosely directed by local or regional Bosnian Croat leaders, and not - at least I never saw convincing evidence that it was - directed by Tudjman.

Q: Do you think Tudjman did not know about it, did not follow this closely, did not authorize the Bosnian Croats to go after the Muslims?

NEITZKE: Well, I'm speaking here about the early days of this Croat-Muslim tension and fighting. Susak was himself a proud Herzegovinian, and he kept a close eye on Bosnian Croat interests. When Susak perceived Herzegovinian interests threatened, he was not averse to straying from Tudjman's guidelines; initiatives that he may have authorized on his own, or authorization that he too liberally interpreted, got Tudjman in trouble a couple times. Tudjman too cared about the Bosnian Croats, no question, but not to the extent Susak did.

Let me digress here to introduce another player, Mate Boban, the Bosnian Croat leader. I met Boban just once, in January 1993. Vance and Owen were then pushing for Western support for their cantons plan in Bosnia, and Boban and the Bosnian Croats stood accused of jumping the gun and beginning to take control in certain areas that the Vance/Owen plan envisioned for eventual Bosnian Croat dominance. When I met him in Zagreb, Boban was seething with anger, directed mainly at critics of his premature move. At that moment the Bosnian Croats were the only Bosnian party unequivocally supporting the Vance/Owen plan. The Serbs didn't like it because it would mean surrendering large chunks of territory they'd seized and cleansed. Izetbegovic didn't like it for a host of reasons. And Washington didn't like it, but offered no alternative. Boban reserved most of his wrath for Izetbegovic, although he hurled no ethnic or religious epithets. Rather, he attributed the Bosnian Croats' increasingly desperate situation to what he saw as Izetbegovic's unwarranted rush to Bosnian independence and bungling of Bosnia's defense when the Serbs made good on their pre-independence threats. Boban contended that no one in the West cared a whit about the Bosnian Croats; they would, I recall his saying, just as soon see the Bosnian Croats flushed into the sea. Boban was not a pleasant man; he played a lot of angles during the war and was said to have engaged in more than his share of corruption. But, while I strongly challenged what he'd said, on his central point he wasn't altogether wrong. The Hercegovinians had always stood at the bottom of the Bosnian pecking order. Boban argued they were on their own and would have to do what they'd have to do to defend themselves.

I took the opportunity in reporting on this meeting - this was just about at the Bush-Clinton handover in January 1993 - to critique the outgoing Bush Administration's stand on Vance/Owen, tacitly supporting the so-called Geneva peace process that had produced the plan, yet constantly nitpicking and undermining their efforts while declining to take the lead ourselves or suggest a viable alternative. I recommended that Washington get off the fence and either support Vance/Owen as the best that could realistically be achieved, and try to end the bloodshed, or openly abandon Vance/Owen and Geneva and pick up the baton ourselves. I also pointed out that while Washington's deep sympathy for Izetbegovic and the Muslims was laudable, the Bosnia of the past and the future was not theirs alone.

Q: Any reaction to that? I mean that was, that sounds like a dissent message to me.

NEITZKE: One former boss sent me a congratulatory message saying it was the damnedest cable he'd ever read, or words to that effect, but no, I heard nothing directly from Washington. It was the eve of the inauguration, for one thing; I'm not sure who was minding the store.

But getting back to Boban and the growing Croat-Muslim tensions, in January tempers had not quite yet boiled over in most Croat-Muslim areas. By April, however, the situation had grown much worse. That was the month when Bosnian Croat forces committed the Lasva Valley massacres to which I referred. And it was the month before Bosnian Croats in and around Mostar began driving Muslims out of West Mostar, mostly to the East Bank, and rounding up thousands of Muslim males and confining them in ad hoc camps set up around the area. But strangely, it appeared that as late as that same month, April, Croats were still transshipping Iranian arms to some Muslim forces.

Q: How do you know that?

NEITZKE: Our Special Envoy for the former Yugoslavia, Reggie Bartholomew, stopped in Zagreb in April, along with Barry McCaffrey. They met with Tudjman and in a private exchange between Susak and Bartholomew the next morning, Susak asked Bartholomew whether the USG wanted Croatia to continue moving Iranian arms to the Muslims.

Q: But I thought you said that all of that had been halted the previous autumn during that episode with the Iranian 747 at Zagreb Airport and all.

NEITZKE: Well, I thought so as well, and I was taken aback by Susak's question. Could it have been a feint, to cover up what he must have known the Bosnian Croats were about to undertake against the Muslims? I don't think so; that wasn't Susak's style; it wasn't how he'd operated with us. Or was it anticipatory, was Susak even then envisioning the larger Iranian role that still lay a year off? I doubt that as well. So I assume there must have been at least a modest continuing Iranian arms flow at that time, so modest - unlike the Iranian 747 the previous fall - that we hadn't detected it. I recall this episode vividly because it was part of what I later had to testify on during the various investigations of how the Iranians had gotten so deeply involved in Bosnia. What was most interesting here is that Bartholomew in April 1993 told Susak that the USG could not be in the position of approving Croatian transshipments of Iranian arms.

Q: Well, that sounds like a very weak no.

NEITZKE: Bartholomew's response was clear enough: we would not approve or in any way be a party to the introduction of more Iranian arms into the conflict. And that position jibed with the one I had taken in September 1992. Did Reggie's response to Susak lead to a halt in any Iranian arms flow still underway at that point? I don't know, but I'm confident that there was no significant uptick in Iranian arms shipments following the Bartholomew-Susak exchange. We and others would have noticed it.

Twelve months later, however, in the spring of 1994, Galbraith and then Special Envoy Chuck Redman - on wink-and-nod instructions from Tony Lake - gave Tudjman a precisely opposite answer in response to essentially the same query. Redman then told Tudjman that the USG was not in a position to tell Croatia not to engage in Iranian arms transshipments. That was the Clinton Administration's supposed "green light" to an alleged undisclosed covert activity and to Iran's deepening involvement in Bosnia that prompted the various investigations. And that was followed by a surge in Croatian-Iranian relations on several fronts, a large increase in the Iranian presence in Croatia, and, of course, large-scale Iranian arms deliveries. But returning to the Spring of 1993, the Susak-Bartholomew exchange seemed to indicate that as late as April of that year Croat-Muslim relations were still holding in some areas. That, however, was about to change.

Which brings me to the second factor - in addition to the cumulative destabilizing effects of the Serbian onslaught - that contributed to the outbreak of more widespread Croat-Muslim hostilities in mid-1993. That was the lesson some Croats derived from the West's de facto acquiescence in Serbian genocide in the previous year. My guess is that some Croat leaders - possibly Tudjman but more likely Susak, along with Bosnian Croat leaders - calculated that, with relative impunity, they too could forcefully strike the Muslims, especially in areas where they felt Muslims were encroaching, and in addition could begin seizing areas in which, if the Vance/Owen plan were implemented, Croats would be accorded dominance. One thing I heard around this time from an angry Susak was that some Muslim elements had begun using against Croats the very guns that Zagreb had been funneling to them. Yes, that sounds a bit neat, but that's what he said.

I very strongly doubt, however, that either Tudjman or Susak authorized the cleansing of the Lasva Valley, let alone the massacres in late April. By the same token, it's difficult to believe that what briefly transpired in and around Mostar in early May, which was widespread and obviously coordinated, could have taken place without some kind of nod from Zagreb. There, Bosnian Croats, as I mentioned, drove nearly all Muslims from the Western part of the city and began rounding up large numbers of Muslim males and holding them in buildings or improvised camps throughout the area. Those who believe that, notwithstanding the CIA study, Croats treated Muslims just as badly as the Serbs did, often point to those camps around Mostar as proof of their contention.

I can only guess what might have become of these Muslims had the Croat roundup and imprisonment effort continued unimpeded. The Serbs did not have a monopoly on sadism. Fortunately, it didn't continue unimpeded. We, UN personnel, and others were on the Croats' case virtually from the outset. By chance, our military attachï¿½ and his assistant were in this area at the time. We had them seek entry to some of the holding facilities, and they got in. With their eye-witness accounts we were able to correct wildly overblown reports that the Croats had set up a system of brutal concentration and death camps similar to what the Serbs had established a year earlier. But, more importantly, we were able to confront the Croats early on with the disturbing details of what we had seen and demand that the process be halted and those detained freed. With pressure from us and many others, nearly all the roundup activity was halted and nearly all of the prisoners were eventually released. For a brief while, however, there was severe mistreatment, even torture of some of these Muslims. And there were a small number of now-documented killings.

Although this bold Bosnian Croat move had essentially been nipped in the bud, a line had been crossed; Croat-Muslim relations in these areas would never be the same. The Bosnian Croats had been reined in, but not completely. Incidents of Croat persecution of Muslims continued to accumulate, and East Mostar became a hell hole, especially for the many displaced Muslims swelling the population there. UN and Embassy DART officials visiting East Mostar reported the most god awful conditions. And then Stari Most, the beautiful old, medieval bridge, the symbol of Mostar, and to some extent, of Bosnia, was deliberately destroyed by Croatian forces.

Q: Well, again, how do you draw such a moral distinction between what the Croats were doing, or at least tried to do, and what the Serbs did? And also, is Tudjman himself, even if he didn't order it, not responsible for what happened around Mostar?

NEITZKE: On the first part of your question, drawing moral distinctions between what the Serbs and the Croats did to the Muslims, I'm reminded of the line that MacKenzie used, the pro-Serb Canadian UNPROFOR general. He compared the situation in Bosnia to that of three serial killers, one of whom had brutally murdered 15 victims, one 10, and the other 5. Do you really want to help the one who has only murdered 5, he would ask. His point was that all three parties were indistinguishably evil. But the best analysis of who did what to whom, of who killed whom, the comprehensive CIA study I've mentioned, destroys MacKenzie's contention. It was nothing like 15-10-5; Serbs were guilty of 90 percent or more of the killing, raping, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. The Croats came in second at a few percent, and the Muslims a distant third, and much of that was probably retaliatory. So, yes, the comparative guilt of the parties is absolutely distinguishable, morally and in nearly every other way, and we do a great disservice, it seems to me, in fuzzing that over or failing to recognize it.

Now on Tudjman and the events around Mostar, yes, I blame him, as we did at the time. Whether or not he had personally authorized this roundup - I was never able to establish that - he had to have known about it almost immediately. At a minimum he failed to stop it right away. So, yes, I do blame him. Some will forever believe it was part and parcel of his long-held design to carve up Bosnia. I've already suggested several reasons why I don't think that was the case, that Tudjman had, or at least ever attempted to execute, any such grand plan. But there's another factor worth mentioning. The expat Hercegovinians played an outsized role in Croatia's defense effort and were disproportionately represented in Tudjman's wartime Government. When threats arose to their kin in Bosnia, Tudjman tended to give them more rein than he should have, and wasn't as quick as he should have been to enforce discipline, because these guys were a significant part of his political base. Even if the Bosnian Croats initiated the Mostar actions more or less on their own, however, Tudjman should have immediately done whatever was necessary to stop it, no excuses.

I should add here that this effort, to get Tudjman and Susak to rein in the Bosnian Croats, continued apace through Galbraith's arrival at the end of June 1993. Peter made this one of his earliest priorities, and stuck with it, telling Croatian audiences they couldn't have it both ways - if they wanted the West's sympathy as a victim of Serb aggression, they couldn't be beating up Muslims around Mostar.

Peter subsequently wrote, after his falling out with Tudjman and his departure from Croatia, that long after his arrival in 1993 we continued to receive numerous reports of horrific atrocities perpetrated by Croatian forces against the Muslims. Peter cast this as part of what he says was Tudjman's determined effort to carve out a Greater Croatia by hiving off large parts of Bosnia. With due respect to Peter, and in light of what I've already explained, I have to say that the part about a sustained, calculated Greater Croatia land grab by Tudjman is ex post facto; it's not at all how he or I saw it at the time. And it's just not warranted. And on the incoming atrocity reports, Peter may be confused as to timing; most such reports came in before Peter even arrived in Croatia. There was the Stupni Do massacre in October 1993, I believe, but I don't think we had confirmation of Croatian responsibility for that in anything like real time. And I don't think there was anything else nearly that egregious in that period. Yes, the Bosnian Croats and Muslims continued to slug it out at a lower level even after the worst of the Mostar area camps episode was wound up, and Croats were far more often the ones behaving abysmally. And it wasn't just or even mainly killings; it was conditions in East Mostar and increasingly indiscriminate convoy blockages that troubled us.

As for Peter's additional suggestion that it was mainly his own dogged efforts throughout this period that brought about, or laid the groundwork for, the Washington Agreement of March 1994 that nominally ended Bosnian Croat-Muslim fighting, well, that's quite a stretch. It's funny. I recall Peter's once joking with several of us, apropos of the Washington Agreement, reminding us that history is ultimately determined by those who write it and adding that he'd learned a thing or two about divvying up historical accolades. I want to be clear about this. Peter did some excellent work as ambassador, for which he deserves much credit. But the suggestion that he was the key player in achieving the Washington Agreement, and that he worked against the backdrop of many months of continuing Croatian atrocities as Tudjman sought to carve out a Greater Croatia, is way over the top. Peter did have a small but important role in the Washington Agreement, however, which I guess we'll come to.

Again, as to who ordered those initial Croat actions around Mostar, I don't think it has ever been firmly established. Some saw Tudjman's hand in nearly everything, but Tudjman's grip on things wasn't always that tight; his operation was heavily ad hoc.

Q: What do you mean?

NEITZKE: Here's an example that I shared years later with the Chief Prosecutor or chief investigator for The Hague Tribunal and a couple of his staff. He was trying to establish chain of command for some of the worst crimes committed by Croatian elements in Bosnia. He asked me about a couple cables I'd sent in at the time describing an occasionally semi-chaotic Tudjman office and senior government apparatus in Zagreb. That did not jibe with the smoothly-running, top-to-bottom, Tudjman-led operation that he was hoping to prove had dictated virtually every action undertaken by Croats in Bosnia. I wasn't happy to have to disabuse him of this notion, because some of the people he was going after were truly rotten. But in fact, the early Tudjman government was anything but an all-knowing, well-greased machine. To illustrate, I told him that once, just minutes after the Serbs rocketed Zagreb's outskirts in the fall of 1993, I had received two calls in rapid succession from Tudjman's closest aide. The first conveyed disorder bordering on pandemonium in the President's office. The second call was to reassure me that, whatever I might think I'd just heard, in fact there had been no panic whatsoever. That was one of the strangest, best insights I got into how close a run thing Tudjman's early operation really was.

Q: Did Washington's view of Croatia change when they took after the Muslims around Mostar? Did we threaten them in any way?

NEITZKE: The sanctions option was again on the table, as I recall, and that, at least the threat, was certainly warranted. But I saw a different side of that whole issue when I went back to Washington for consultations that summer. By then NSC staff and State were desperate to move beyond Bosnia, to make it appear as though in their initial six months in office they hadn't botched the issue; they'd taken a tremendous amount of heat in the press. They sympathized deeply with the Muslims' plight, as most all of us did. But that, and a reluctance to do anything tangible, let alone risky, to actually help the Muslims, seemed to be about all that passed for policy at that point. Their take on Bosnian ground truth seemed to me naï¿½ve at best, which was strange given all the information to which they had access.

When larger-scale Croat-Muslim fighting erupted in the late spring and continued into the summer, Muslim forces also mustered the strength to push Croats out of a few areas in which the two communities had coexisted. One NSC official I called on in Washington shortly thereafter strongly backed these Muslim actions, suggesting that they were all legitimate GOBH activities and thus enjoyed USG support. She spoke as though she were unaware that Croats were even a constituent people of Bosnia. I interrupted her to ask what she found noble about rousting out women and children - of any national group - in the middle of the night and driving them away, perhaps forever, from their ancestral homes. Wasn't that exactly the kind of activity for which we had roundly and justifiably condemned first the Serbs and more recently the Croats? In any event, that was the caliber of ground truth awareness and policy thinking that underlay Washington's renewed threat of sanctions against Croatia in mid-1993.

A year later, in the summer of 1994, when I again came back to Washington briefly I found pretty much the same pathetic policy, or policy avoidance, situation. When I raised the possibility of military action against the Serbs - who were again on the rampage - a senior NSC official told me that, while some in the White House wanted to hit the Serbs hard, no one in the White House had been able to convince the JCS to use "their army" - those were his words - to do so. So, after eighteen months in office, that's where Clinton stood vis-a-vis the military, the idea of his getting the military to do anything to which they objected was all but inconceivable.

While we're on it, there was another aspect of how Washington, and Brussels too, NATO, dealt with Bosnia that was always frustrating. It seemed that for them Bosnia was often essentially a bloodless paper exercise, an issue for endless debating, negotiating and drafting. You'd get cables exuding pride at their having arrived at some accord following what had to have been a laborious, word-smithing exercise. They'd present this document, this plan or whatever, as though it were a genuine accomplishment, something real, when often you knew it would have no significant effect on events on the ground or would go unimplemented altogether. Yet these drafting successes too were an essential component of our timid, minimalist policy, providing a measure of self-delusion that the process was moving forward when in fact it wasn't.

Q: Okay, let us turn to Ambassador Galbraith's arrival. The end of June 1993, I think you said. How did that go, I mean as far as your position was concerned? It's not normal. Usually someone who has been chief of mission or charge for a long time and has established himself on the local scene and all, well, might wish to leave when the new guy came. But you did not. You stayed and became Galbraith's DCM. Why? And what kind of adjustments were necessary in how you did business, your role in the Embassy and with diplomatic colleagues in other Embassies?

NEITZKE: You're right. Normally one would have left on Peter's arrival. But this wasn't a normal situation, even a normal lengthy charge situation. I'd been chief of mission, the senior American there for a year. And I probably had closer ties and more contact with senior Croats in that year than all but a few other foreigners in town. Not just with Tudjman, but with Prime Minister Sarinic, Susak, Foreign Minister Granic, and various others. So yes, the handoff to Peter, with my staying there, was a little strange.

If things hadn't worked out between us, obviously I would have left. But things did work out. First, although the ConGen-then Embassy had been tiny when I arrived, it had grown rapidly that first year and in the summer of 1993 was still growing. Sections of one officer when I arrived were now sections of three or four. New sections had been added. New agencies had arrived. We were doing democracy and rule of law promotion through USAID and others. Lots of new initiatives. The old Con-Gen building was bursting at the seams, even as we sought to shore it up physically. We were acquiring additional office space around town. So by then, long before then actually, there was a serious DCM job to be done. Secondly, Peter and I saw essentially eye to eye on the issues, those confronting both the Embassy and the U.S. Government, although that changed toward the end of our two years together, especially regarding growing Iranian influence in Croatia and Bosnia. So there was no clash of viewpoints. Thirdly, Peter had his own agenda, his own initiatives, but beyond those he let me, wanted me, to run much of the show day to day. And he traveled a lot, in and out of the country, so there was quite a bit of de facto and real charge time those last two years.

In my dealings with other diplomats, it was occasionally a bit awkward but not overly so. I'd established good relationships with many of the Ambassadors and most of those continued to invite me to events they hosted, or speak freely with me, even seek me out, at other events, even as they were getting to know Peter. This sounds strange from a strict protocol standpoint, but somehow it worked. It would probably have been a lot more difficult to manage had another FSO come out as Ambassador instead of Peter.

Q: What about your wife, your children, how were they getting along? Did they want to stay on?

NEITZKE: From a family standpoint, wartime Zagreb turned out to be a good fit. The kids were healthy and thriving at the American School of Zagreb. ASZ was a great place, with probably 15 or 20 nationalities represented. In addition to caring for our kids, my wife had carved out a niche for herself, working sometimes alone and sometimes with the wives of other Ambassadors on practical ways to help refugees in the Zagreb area. There was the large annual party at our house hosted by my wife and other Ambassadors' wives for refugee children. On some days my wife would load up the car with apples, or powdered milk, toys, or other goods in short supply in the camps and drive out there and distribute them. Despite the language barrier, she connected with a number of these people. One family I recall in particular, who have since returned to Vukovar and are still struggling to rebuild their lives, lived at that time in a camp out by Zagreb Airport. They still send my wife cards and letters on the holidays. When my family was ultimately evacuated on short notice during the Serbian rocketing of Zagreb in 1995, it fell to me to go around later and say goodbye to some of the refugee and displaced families with whom my wife had become close. Some wept openly as the news that she'd had to leave and probably wouldn't be back. She also helped found the Zagreb International Women's Club, which also had assistance to refugees as one of its earliest projects. So she was busy too.

While we're on this, there's one other aspect of the transition from me to Peter. By the end of that first year, I had pretty much exhausted Washington's tolerance. I had crossed swords with so many people that if Peter hadn't come out, I'd almost certainly have had to leave. So I was relieved by Peter's arrival. The gorilla climbed off my back, at least partly. And I got my first real break shortly thereafter, a couple weeks back in the U.S.

Q: You mentioned your family's evacuation from Zagreb in 1995. We can get to that later, but how did you find the security situation there, from a personal standpoint?

NEITZKE: Surreal at times. Shortly after we arrived an undetected land mine at Zagreb Airport exploded, badly injuring a heavy equipment operator. We lived on the edge of a war zone, within range of Krajina Serb rockets, in a city inundated with displaced persons and refugees. The Serbs fired rockets onto the city three times when we were there; once in the fall of 1993, hitting a suburb, and twice in early May 1995, with cluster bomb warheads, striking throughout downtown Zagreb - quite close to the Embassy - and killing a number of people. Guns were ubiquitous. Every New Year's Eve at midnight there was the most amazing city-wide sound and light show of guns being fired. We had a great view of it from our house on a hill above the city. The same day as the bombing of the World Trade Center in late February 1993, a bomb that apparently had dropped from a passing vehicle came to rest outside the main door of the Embassy. As best we could tell, it wasn't intended for us; apparently attaching a bomb to the underside of an enemy's car happened with some frequency; the streetcar tracks outside the Embassy had evidently jarred this one loose. At home we had a 24-hour armed guard provided by the Croatian Government. Some of these men were more professional than others. I remember my very young sons telling me how neat they thought it was to be learning soccer moves from a guy toting a loaded machine gun. Yet life went on, and one didn't often feel much of a sense of danger. There was an almost cocoon-like sense of security to the place, false security perhaps. And by the spring of 1995 that had changed entirely, as some of our personnel came under active surveillance by Iranian-backed terrorist groups and we geared everyone up for possible evacuation. And we did eventually evacuate all families and non-essential personnel after the first rocketing of central Zagreb in early May 1995.

Q: Alright. Well, it is the end of June 1993. Peter Galbraith appears on the scene. I am just guessing that he was the sort of Ambassador who would have wanted to make his presence felt in short order. Is that correct? Talk a little about his priorities and about changes, if there were any, in how the Embassy dealt with the, I guess, policy vacuum that you have described in Washington.

NEITZKE: Peter had a politician's feel and a politician's thirst for the public aspects of the job. He wasn't publicity shy. In one of our first discussions he asked what he might do, within policy constraints, to try to win over the Croats, the man in the street. I suggested he travel out to Eastern Slavonia and tell them that Sector East is illegally occupied territory, that it's part of Croatia and that the U.S. strongly supports its reintegration into Croatia. Peter made that trip early on, spoke out forthrightly, and his stock soared. It wasn't quite Brzezinski at the Khyber Pass, but the Croats loved it. Then, having won over much of the public with his pitch on Sector East, he began telling audiences that their Bosnian co-nationalists' mistreatment of the Muslims was unacceptable. That was an inspired move on Peter's part, great work, and it had an effect.

While I think of it, however, I remember another trip nearly two years later that Peter and a few other Ambassadors, I believe, took out to Slavonia, after Zagreb's liberation of Sector West. They accompanied Tudjman on what for Tudjman was a triumphal journey. Peter recounted the ecstatic reception that Tudjman and he had received from the crowds that greeted them, calling it a virtual John and Bobby (Kennedy) experience. That's the only time, by the way, that I ever heard anyone anywhere in any respect liken Franjo Tudjman to President Kennedy.

As it happened, the peaceful, negotiated reintegration of the UNPAs into Croatia became a focus of Peter's and the Z-4's efforts in late 1994 and into 1995, as pressure was building and Croatia was preparing to move against Sectors North and South.

Q: What was the Z-4?

NEITZKE: It stood for Zagreb Four. It comprised Peter, the Russian Ambassador, and representatives of the European Union and UN. This was a group that sprang to life, or at least assumed its formal shape, largely at Peter's initiative. It aimed at fostering negotiations between Zagreb and the Krajina Serbs on reintegration of the UNPAs. At the time, most international attention on the Balkan peace-seeking front was focused on Bosnia and the efforts, feeble though they were, of the Contact Group. Meanwhile, UNPROFOR's efforts to keep peace in and around the UNPAs and to get Zagreb talking to the Croatian Serbs were going nowhere. So Peter saw an opportunity, and the Z-4 was the result. My impression was that Washington didn't take the Z-4s' efforts terribly seriously, and some sniggered at its pretensions, but neither did they oppose this effort. And from time to time they were forced to pay attention to it.

The main problem that anyone faced trying to broker a deal between Zagreb and Knin in the late 1994-1995 timeframe is that, as I earlier mentioned, the Security Council had already resolved the central issue; the UNPAs belonged to Croatia, period. That fact was already reflected in Croatia's constitution. And that was unacceptable to Knin. So any effort, such as the Z-4's, to carve out a measure of autonomy for the Krajina within the Croatian state was going to face tough sledding on both sides of the line. In addition, many of the Serb leaders in Knin were wanted on criminal charges in Croatia and their fortunes depended on Belgrade's increasingly tenuous backing.

Q: Why do you say tenuous? These were all Belgrade's men...

NEITZKE: Ostensibly, but most were homegrown Krajina Serbs, armed by and celebrated in Belgrade at the war's outset, but as time passed increasingly seen as burdensome, socially backward, distant relatives, more trouble than they were worth.

The other thing that made negotiation of a Zagreb-Knin deal so difficult is that even as conditions in the Krajina deteriorated, Zagreb was engaged in a large military buildup. And Tudjman's rhetoric was becoming more bellicose; the handwriting was on the wall.

Q: Well now, how closely did you monitor this, Croatia's getting hold of all these weapons. This was all in violation of the arms embargo, was it not?

NEITZKE: We tracked it, but not all that aggressively. Our military attachï¿½ reported on various aspects of the buildup, and I suspect that the Pentagon knew pretty well what was going on - at least until the Iranian pipeline phase began in late spring 1994. In that regard, we'll need to discuss the role of MPRI, but later.

Q: MPRI? That is...

NEITZKE: Military Professional Resources Incorporated, a private - well, at least technically, legally private - group of ex-U.S. military officers and senior enlisted men, whose leadership included former JCS members. They entered into an agreement with the Croats to provide professional training - supposedly non-tactical - to classes of Croatian military officers. MPRI has often been cited by Croatia's critics as the architect of Storm, the operational name for the Croats' military retaking of the Krajina in 1995.

As far as I know, Washington was never even close to making Croatia's arms buildup a bilateral issue. On the contrary, at least by mid-1994, Washington tacitly accepted the buildup and by the early summer of 1995 had all but embraced it. A lot of it, the arms acquisition that is, was done very quietly, not so quietly that Belgrade wouldn't notice, of course, but not so blatantly that Western governments would have to address it. In retrospect, as I'm sure Holbrooke would agree, the Croatian buildup and military offensive in 1995 were critical in laying the groundwork for Dayton.

But, getting back, Peter's Z-4 was on a different track altogether. To an extent, Peter tried to use Zagreb's threats and militarization to focus minds in Knin. He traveled to the Krajina, including Knin itself, at least a couple times to meet with Krajina Serb leaders. I accompanied him on one trip, coming away with the impression that this was a beautiful - especially Plitvice Lakes - but wretchedly poor area and that prospects for getting this bunch ever to agree to anything acceptable to Zagreb were nil. Once, Peter even brought in Roger Fisher from Harvard, the author of "Getting to Yes," to sit down in Knin with Serb leaders to instruct them in the technical skill of negotiating. A fairly audacious effort. Pure Peter. But I don't think even Fisher had imagined as tough a sell as the Serbs in Knin. Peter got a lot of mileage out of all of this, however; the Z-4 got a lot of local publicity. When the Croats finally moved militarily, however, beginning with Sector West in May 1995, and then Storm in August, Peter and the Z-4 ran out of time, although that effort contributed to the later Erdut Agreement on Sector East.

Q: I must say, you do not sound as though you were personally sold on the Z-4.

NEITZKE: He was the Ambassador, so I supported him, but frankly I saw most of the effort as futile and to some extent as a distraction. It seemed to me most unlikely - no, impossible - that the Croats could ever be induced to come to terms with what they viewed, with some justification, as the hoodlums in charge in Knin. In fact, by late 1994, we began hearing from Tudjman intimates witheringly dismissive characterizations of the Z-4's efforts, of the specific ideas they kept pushing for bridging the chasm between Knin and Zagreb. This wasn't going to fly and the Croats were using the illusion of a peace effort to ready their forces for military action that they had long decided was inevitable. Peter, on the other hand, appeared to believe that he was making progress, that he was building up significant capital in Knin. But the two times that I recall he tried to use that capital, during the Bihac episode and amid the rocketing of Zagreb during the liberation of Sector West, they ignored him. I'm not saying that the Z-4 effort, right from the get-go, was much ado about nothing. But there came a point when it had clearly run its course, when larger forces were taking hold. The deal just wasn't going to happen and, notwithstanding the separate and belated Erdut Agreement, it didn't. I personally...

Q: Excuse me. Okay, you said futile. I can understand that, but why was it a distraction, a distraction from what?

NEITZKE: A distraction from where our attention and limited assets might otherwise have been focused. My own modest efforts to induce the Clinton Administration to get serious about Bosnia had had no visible effect. But I'd hoped that with Peter's arrival - and his Washington connections - we could redouble those efforts. I thought we had to keep trying, even though the task had become more complicated by the Croatian-Muslim tensions. I continued doing what I could - with high-level visitors and journalists, and by pushing our continued atrocity reporting. But Peter had other priorities. His Ambassadorship was the high point of his professional life up until then, and he wasn't going to risk it with quasi-dissent cables or anything else that irritated officials in Washington. He was determined to make his mark, however, and if he couldn't do that through high-profile work on Bosnia - and he couldn't, that arena was already occupied - he would do it through the Z-4.

I recall, just as an aside, that on my last day in the office, after we'd been together for two years, Peter came in with the "gift" of a copy of a cable he'd just sent the Department, essentially blasting our policy of endless dithering on Bosnia. In response to that, Peter quickly got a call from Holbrooke, then EUR Assistant Secretary, saying basically, well, that was nice, but do you want to stay in your job or not? And later, in his toast at my farewell party, Peter quipped that he'd assiduously followed every piece of advice I'd given him except all of those which would probably have gotten him fired.

Part of my reserve concerning the Z-4 effort lay in the fact that for over three years there had been non-stop negotiating activity; there was always a peace process one could point to. But most of this was so divorced from on the ground realities that when it did take substantive form it was dead on arrival. What it accomplished, however, what part of its purpose was, was to provide the illusion of a serious international effort to stem the killing while that killing continued apace. The Z-4 was hardly the worst offender in that regard. But as the Z-4 effort came to occupy ever more of Peter's and the Embassy's time, yes, I felt that we - in terms of Embassy Zagreb's focus - were treading water on Bosnia. And I worried that Peter was getting too close, too chummy, with Tudjman and Susak.

Q: How so?

NEITZKE: Well, for example, vacationing alone with the Tudjmans, the whole Tudjman family, at Tito's old villa on Brioni, an intimacy that Peter reveled in, and his using a Defense Ministry villa on the Adriatic for private getaways. This sort of thing could obviously make it harder for one to get tough with Tudjman when need be. I imagine Peter would say that he didn't think a "get tough" approach with Tudjman would have worked in any event. And on this, we strongly disagreed.

I had watched Tudjman's evolution from an ultranationalist all but ostracized by Washington, to a leader whom we not only recognized but helped win greater international respectability, to a man who, by early 1995, in his latest threat to seize the UNPAs by force, acted as though he could with impunity blow off a personal appeal from the President of the United States. Enough was enough. Tudjman was gaming us. We seemed to have lost all perspective on the man and on who owed what to whom. I advocated - with Peter and with several high-level visitors, and at the NSC and elsewhere in Washington - a much more direct, confrontational approach. Tudjman and Susak were gearing up for war. I understood their frustration, and I sympathized with their goal of reintegrating the UNPAs. But it was clear there would be major problems in their doing so. I took one of Tudjman's closest advisors to lunch in early 1995 and told him we didn't think Croatian forces had the professional discipline to take back the Krajina without committing massive violations of human rights, atrocities, and killings. He listened to what I said without disputing it and no doubt passed it on. It was a concern some Croat leaders also had, not something strong enough to deter them from moving on the UNPAs eventually, but something they knew they'd need to be careful about. MPRI was to have helped out, at least on that aspect.

Q: Yes, well, but let us return now to the situation during Ambassador Galbraith's first year, that would be the summer of 1993 to the summer of 1994. You have mentioned the Croat-Muslim fighting and the Washington Agreement, but what led up to that?

NEITZKE: The heightened Croat-Muslim tension in mid-1993, and the various, mainly Croat attacks that that spawned were complicating Washington's standoff policy. As ugly as the situation in Bosnia had been up to that time, it threatened to get even worse. That's when Chuck Redman, who had replaced Bartholomew as U.S. representative on the Contact Group, began his prolonged effort to quell the Croat-Muslim fighting and reconcile the two groups. He didn't have much to work with. One thing he did have working in his favor, however, was the aftermath of a summer 1993 marketplace massacre in Sarajevo. That particular massacre was followed by a burst of U.S. and Allied indignation and the shooting down of several Serbian aircraft for violating no-fly restrictions. The impact of that incident has always been underestimated; it was the most significant use of Western force against the Serbs until the summer of 1995 and for a moment put the fear of god not only into the Serbs but into the Croats and Muslims as well. It appeared briefly as though the U.S. were about to get serious. Other than through Chuck's initiative we didn't exploit that fear, but to me it always stood as a clear indication that at virtually any point a forceful expression of U.S. determination to halt the killing could have brought the Serbs to heel.

Redman's effort, which produced the Washington Agreement of March 1994, was one of the very few energetic, disciplined U.S. diplomatic undertakings in the whole ex-Yugo mess prior to Dayton. But in retrospect it was akin to a number of brief surges of activity on Bosnia by the Bush and Clinton Administrations, each of which proved to be less than met the eye and saw little or no serious follow through. This one was largely a product of Chuck's effort; from what I could observe - and Chuck was frequently in Zagreb during this time - no one high up in the Clinton Administration was willing to risk much of anything to help him. So Chuck deserves great credit.

Q: But, and you have already referred to this, Ambassador Galbraith did at least help with that negotiation, did he not?

NEITZKE: He did. I think he provided Chuck some critical assistance at a couple points.

Q: Okay, then, the Washington Agreement covered what?

NEITZKE: It was actually two agreements, reached after a few days of indirect talks conducted by Redman in Washington between Croatian Foreign Minister Granic and Bosnian Prime Minister Silajdzic. One agreement created a nominal federation of Croat and Muslim-held areas in Bosnia. The other created, I think it's accurate to say, a notional - since it never got off the ground - confederation between Croatia and the Bosnian Croat/Muslim federation. At the time, I didn't give Redman's effort much of a chance, in part because he was relying so heavily on Granic.

Q: The Foreign Minister.

NEITZKE: Yes. Granic was always personable, pleasant to deal with, and very bright. But he wasn't a Tudjman insider, at least not in the sense that Susak and others were. Granic was not one of the HDZ, the ruling Croatian Democratic Union, hard-liners. There were times when Granic seemed a bit too ready to please, appearing to support positions that didn't quite reflect Tudjman's, and certainly not Susak's, views. So I thought Chuck had to be careful to see that Tudjman would back up what Granic agreed to in this closeted Washington back and forth deal making. But to Chuck's and Granic's credit, they got it done. And with Tudjman and Izetbegovic in attendance, Clinton presided over the signing ceremony. For the moment at least, we were peacemakers. It was a welcome respite from the Clinton Administration's Bosnia nightmare.

But these were skeletal agreements, aimed mainly at getting the two sides to stop fighting one another. The ink was barely dry before the question arose of who was going to put meat on these bones. Both parties wanted arms with which to push back the Serbs. Unless someone provided weapons, gave them some tangible incentive to cooperate, they'd be back to fighting one another in short order. Yet it seemed at the time as though no one in Washington had anticipated this problem.

Q: The arms embargo was still in place.

NEITZKE: Yes. And Washington balked. Attempting to lift the embargo at the UN would have met opposition by UN officials and most of our NATO allies, who had troops on the ground in Bosnia. Since we still lacked the political will to join them, a U.S. attempt to lift the embargo faced no better prospects than it had a year earlier on Christopher's failed mission to sell "lift and strike." Nor were we prepared to circumvent the embargo surreptitiously, although that would have been my preferred option.

Q: Well, was this ever considered in Washington, do you know, trying to get arms to the Bosnians secretly somehow?

NEITZKE: I once had a brief exchange on this possibility, no specifics or anything, with Charlie Wilson, when...

Q: The Texas Congressman who helped in our arming the Afghans.

NEITZKE: Yes, when he visited Zagreb. But as far as I know, our circumventing the embargo to get arms to the Muslims was never seriously considered. Well, let me modify that. After meeting with Clinton at the UN in November 1994, Tudjman claimed that he'd been asked for and had provided a commitment that Croatia would funnel arms to the Bosnians. But that didn't appear in the memcon of the meeting and we could never nail it down. Of course, by then Croatia was already funneling in Iranian arms, so perhaps Clinton had simply sought reassurance that Croatia would continue doing so. Or perhaps thought was being given to different or additional sources of arms. It was around this time that we heard rumors that senior U.S. officials had earlier convened in Washington and considered a substantial arms deal for the Croats and Muslims, and that the several hundred million dollar value of such a package had been mentioned to at least one Croat official. But I never saw any tangible evidence that those rumors were accurate. In any event, going back to the end of April 1994, we had done nothing at that point on the arms front, and that's when the Iranians again came calling.

Q: Well, let us get into that. The Iranian arms deal eventually caused quite a bit of embarrassment for the Clinton Administration, did it not?

NEITZKE: You might put it that way. As I've already mentioned, the Iranians were shipping arms into the area from very early on, well before the Labor Day 1992 747 incident. And they were evidently still moving some arms in via the Croats during the spring of 1993, when Susak raised this issue with Bartholomew. But all of that was minor compared with what was about to happen.

This strange episode began, for us at least, with a meeting in Foreign Minister Granic's office in late April 1994. Redman was calling on Granic to discuss implementation of the Washington Agreement. I accompanied him. Peter was out of town. At the end of their discussion, Granic, pointedly directing his remarks more toward me than Chuck, said the Iranians had been pressing Croatia to agree to receive and transship weapons to the Bosnian Muslims. The implication was that this was going to be something on a very substantial scale. Granic said Tudjman would call in Peter the following morning and ask how the U.S. wanted Croatia to respond to the Iranians. This was a heads up. He indicated that he personally hoped the U.S. would encourage Croatia to resist this pressure.

Granic, whom I'd gotten to know well by then, was aware of how Washington regarded Tehran. He didn't want to see his government become closely allied with the Iranians, and he didn't want to see power within the HDZ shift even more toward less democratic elements. He knew that there were others, closer to Tudjman than he was, such as Susak - who had visited Tehran in November 1993 - who were willing to risk closer ties with Iran in hopes of obtaining weapons of strategic value for Croatia vis-ï¿½-vis Belgrade.

Q: What sort of strategic weapons? Why?

NEITZKE: Tudjman and Susak knew by then that if they were ever to get the UNPAs back they'd have to do it themselves, militarily. But they weren't sure where, in that looming fight, Belgrade's tipping point lay. As Zagreb fought Belgrade's henchmen for control of these areas, Belgrade, the remnant JNA, might throw everything they had into the fight. Tudjman wanted something with which to deter Milosevic when that point came. And he and Susak hoped that they might find that deterrent in or through Tehran, or at least create in Milosevic's mind the fear that they had obtained such a deterrent. As to what that deterrent might have been, I don't know.

But again, although Tudjman himself doubtless wanted any weapons they might be able to obtain from Iran, there is no way he was going to risk getting closer to that regime without U.S. concurrence. First, he knew we'd find out if did it behind our backs. Secondly, the intense carrot-and-stick negotiating process by which we had just gotten him to sign on to the Washington Agreement left Tudjman wanting to be stay close to us and thus leery of making any major move regarding Bosnia without first speaking with us. Tudjman knew that an Iranian arms pipeline through Croatia would allow Zagreb to rake off some of the more interesting of these weapons and to monitor and control the buildup of Muslim arms better than would be possible if suppliers dealt directly with Sarajevo. And, using the pipeline relationship as cover, the Croats could look into acquiring "strategic" weapons that might be available through Iran. Again, however, Tudjman at this time was very sensitive to Washington. There's just no way he'd have gone ahead without our approval.

Q: Well, after that meeting with the Foreign Minister, I take it you sought instructions?

NEITZKE: We did. Now, again, this is the end of April 1994. Peter came back that evening. I briefed him on the Granic meeting, and he immediately asked Washington what he should tell Tudjman the next day. To describe what happened next, how the Clinton team handled this, as sloppy and amateurish scarcely does it justice.

Peter strongly recommended that the U.S. not object to Croatia's agreeing to the Iranians' proposal. Rather than a cable, however, Peter got a call from Jenonne Walker, the senior NSC European staffer and an old colleague of mine from Policy Planning. Jenonne told Peter that Tony - Tony Lake, the National Security Advisor - had said to tell Tudjman that he had "no instructions." Jenonne added that Tony had winked when conveying the term "no instructions." Peter wasn't happy with that response, believing that it wouldn't satisfy Tudjman's need for U.S. concurrence. And it didn't. Peter met with Tudjman the next morning, used his "no instructions" response, and came back and told me that it hadn't worked; Tudjman had appeared to want a clear go-ahead from Washington.

Peter reclama-ed the "no instructions" instruction, arguing, correctly, that it would cause the Croats to balk and, incorrectly - and utterly without foundation - that the U.S. stance on the Iranian arms shipment intercepted over Labor Day 1992 had led to the Croat-Muslim fighting in 1993. Peter told me he had the clear sense from his first meeting with Tudjman that our position would be determinative and that no new Iranian arms flow had yet begun. So Peter pleaded with Washington for "no objection" instructions. He got nothing in response and was troubled going into a dinner meeting with Tudjman and Redman that night. In that second encounter on this issue, Peter urged Tudjman to weigh carefully what he had not said that morning, i.e., he had not said that we objected. Evidently Tudjman still did not have what he needed because, while walking in to dinner, Tudjman said to Redman within earshot of Peter "what do you want us to do?" According to Peter, Redman responded, "we don't want to be in the position of telling you not to" say yes to the Iranians. This was in stark contrast to the answer Bartholomew had given Susak on this issue a year earlier and to what I had told Tudjman during the Iranian 747 episode on Labor Day 1992. Other sources subsequently confirmed that Redman's response is what Tudjman took as our "green light."

Redman told Peter not to report that exchange by cable. Antsy about not reporting so consequential an exchange, however, Peter spoke with Deputy Secretary Talbott shortly thereafter. Talbott too told him not to report the exchange with Tudjman by cable. He said he'd get right back to Peter on this, but he didn't. At this point Peter and I both wondered - and discussed - whether he was being set up to take the fall if this whole thing blew up in the Administration's face. I recommended, and Peter agreed, much to his later regret, since this document added to the Administration's embarrassment, to record all that had happened in a contemporaneous memorandum that I would sign as a witness to what he said had transpired.

Peter's fears of being set up were soon borne out. The CIA and Pentagon were dead set against what Lake had tried to finagle. So when CIA and the Pentagon asked State and the NSC whether anyone had given Croatia a go ahead to begin transshipping large amounts of Iranian arms, they were told that no such approval had been given. In one of apparently several such denials, a senior State or NSC official, I don't recall who, said that Galbraith had botched his instructions and may inadvertently have led Tudjman to conclude that he could go ahead with the Iranians. Galbraith, he said, was being reprimanded, "having his hands slapped." They claimed that Tudjman was then no longer in doubt where we stood. That was just one of many lies told; no one ever attempted to walk this back with Tudjman, nor did Washington want to walk it back, since it was still unwilling to offer any alternative to the Iranian option. Peter then got a call from EUR DAS Sandy Vershbow - my colleague from London days who would himself shortly head over to the NSC to replace Walker - for the purpose, as Sandy jokingly put it, of "slapping (Peter's) hands."

Peter was pissed off, and justifiably so, by Washington's crude distortion of the professional manner in which he'd carried out his instructions, by Sandy's joking pro forma reprimand, and by the fact that Washington's contorted cover story had apparently leaked. A British paper asked Peter to comment on the "Galbraith screw up" explanation they had heard from Washington to explain rumors of an Iranian arms deal. Peter was able to get that story killed, but he was incensed. Unfortunately, he couldn't adequately vent on Washington, because the senior officials in Washington who were "hanging him out" might prove critical for his further service in this or future Democratic administrations. The only consolation Peter received was an eventual admission by Talbott, in a grotesque understatement, that the "home office" had perhaps not handled this affair as well as it might have.

I was reminded of all this years later during the post-9/11 brouhaha between ex-National Security Advisor - and another former S/P colleague - Sandy Berger and the CIA over whether Sandy had or had not authorized the Agency to take out Osama bin Laden when they had the opportunity. Sandy's posture was classic Clinton. Equivocate, put nothing in writing, preserve deniability, protect your political flank at all costs. That's certainly how they had handled the "green light" decision on Iranian arms.

Q: Well, what about the President? Was this decision Lake's or Clinton's?

NEITZKE: I notice that Peter now maintains it was Clinton's decision, and an excellent one at that. The wagons have now been fully circled in defense of the "green Light" decision; it's portrayed as an almost ingenious stepping stone to Dayton. But at the time we didn't know for a fact that the President had been consulted, although we assumed he must have been. Shortly thereafter we were told that Lake had gotten through to Clinton, who was flying somewhere at the time, and that Clinton had approved this course of action. My guess, however, is that the wink-and-nod aspect of this, the no instructions, no written reporting, originated with Lake.

In the wake of all that followed, several players tried to amend the record. Granic, I am told, did not remember indicating a personal opposing view on the pending Iranian offer. But I remember distinctly, and told Peter at the time, that Granic did express such a view and that he implied the Croatian Government was divided on the question of entering into this arrangement with Iran. I think all of that was in the contemporaneous note we made that I referred to. And I covered this in my later Congressional testimony, as the committees looked into whether Washington's "green light," or any follow up to that decision, had violated U.S. statutes governing reportable covert activities. Various Administration witnesses, Holbrooke most notably, later testified - as the Clinton Administration was being pilloried for facilitating Iran's entry into Europe - both that the Iranian arms pipeline had kept the Croat-Muslim federation intact and thus contributed to Dayton and that Tudjman would likely have proceeded with the deal regardless of what we said. On the manner in which Washington had handled the "green light" decision, some senior Administration witnesses gave answers under oath so blatantly at odds with one another that their cases were referred to the Justice Department for possible prosecution for perjury.

Q: Did you have a personal opinion on the Iranian arms at the time, do you recall?

NEITZKE: I did. I thought we should have told the Croats no, and made it a very firm no. I couldn't see much good coming from inviting a terrorist-sponsoring regime like that in Tehran to establish a major toehold in Europe. That we at least tacitly did so stands, in my mind, as one of the worst decisions that any U.S. administration made in the former Yugoslavia. And we did so at a time when Secretary Christopher and other senior U.S. officials were rightly condemning Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. To what level, exactly, had my country sunk in its determination to avoid joining in the fight to halt genocide in Bosnia? This episode made crystal clear that there was no limit, literally no limit, to the Clinton Administration's cowardice on this issue. As for Peter's and Holbrooke's and others' wildly strained rationalizations of the "green light" decision, the best that can be said is that they knew very well by then what kind of people they were working for, yet they were determined, at all costs, to stay in the game, to remain in the good, employable graces of the Clinton team and the Democratic Party. So they defended the course we had taken, not as the least bad option available, which it wasn't, but as a genuinely smart move, one that allowed arms through to the beleaguered Muslims while limiting Bosnia-related strains within the NATO Alliance.

Q: You called this decision cowardly. But these Iranian arms did help, did they not?

NEITZKE: I've seen speculation that this Iranian "green light" decision was in fact part of a clever, new, extremely close-hold strategy concocted by Lake at Clinton's behest aimed at eventual rapprochement with Tehran. I think that's bunk. The reason we gave the Croats the go ahead was not that we'd suddenly re-thought the nature of the Iranian regime. It was that we had no intention ourselves of arming the federation and something had to be done. If we had told the Croats to say no to Iran, possibly Tudjman but certainly Izetbegovic would have been on our doorstep the next day insisting that we, then, supply them arms, a complicated, NATO-rattling step which, as I've said, still lay well beyond the limits of our willingness to get involved.

Did the Iranian arms help? Viewed narrowly, yes, of course. They and other, smaller flows of arms did help. I doubt, however, that, given what they'd already been through, the Muslims would have succumbed without Iranian weapons. And ultimately it was the Croatian, not the Muslim, push back against the Serbs that began to tip the balance from a strategic standpoint. The "green light" decision did, however, allow the Clinton Administration, for a while longer, to remain on the sidelines. But at what cost? It wasn't just the broader, strategic implications of providing the Iranians, their terrorist cohorts, and their virulent anti-Americanism, an approved gateway into Europe. For those of us on the ground, and our families, this decision would soon have grave consequences.

Q: How so?

NEITZKE: Shortly after the "green light" decision, Croatia's relations with Iran took off. There were frequent high-level delegations between Zagreb and Tehran. Deals of all kinds were being struck and publicized. There was a massive increase in the Iranian presence in Croatia, especially Zagreb. Their Embassy suddenly bristled with antennas. There were Iranian cultural exhibits and celebrations. The works. And within a year of the "green light" decision, Iranian-backed terrorist cells were conducting active surveillance and planning operations against the official American community in Zagreb.

Q: Well, what sort of threats, operations, exactly?

NEITZKE: Okay, but before we get to all that, and to put it all in context, we need to catch up a bit, to say something about the overall deterioration in the Embassy's security situation beginning in late 1994 and heading into 1995. I had a growing sense in this period, as did many others, that various aspects of the ex-Yugo problem were coming to a head. Croatia was clearly preparing for war. Tudjman's threats to move on the UNPAs were becoming bolder and more dismissive of the international community, even, as I've said, playing the U.S. tougher than he had earlier. There wasn't much left to offer him on that front, and our threats to retaliate if he weren't patient were less and less credible. In the Krajina there was a growing air of desperation, as they too issued their threats to respond - including with rocket attacks on Zagreb and other cities - if Croatia moved militarily.

Another example is NATO. By the end of 1994, nearly two years of Clinton Administration denial and dithering on Bosnia had created a deep rift within the organization. NATO was splintering essentially over our continued refusal to engage - on the ground - and lead on Bosnia, even as we pushed for bombing that would endanger our allies' UNPROFOR contingents. The Bihac episode probably saw the worst of that.

Q: Bihac? That was at the intersection of...

NEITZKE: Bihac was both a town and the name given to a large Muslim enclave, one of the so-called UN-designated Safe Areas, in northwestern Bosnia. It was surrounded by Serbian forces throughout the war, but it managed to survive, barely. It had food and some capable military forces, but most importantly it had a charismatic, renegade Muslim leader, Fikret Abdic, who had broken with Izetbegovic, and who was good at cutting whatever deals were necessary - with Serbs and Croats - to ensure his people's survival. In late 1994 Muslim forces tried to break out of the Bihac pocket. After some initial successes they faced a massive Serb counteroffensive. That confronted the UN formally, and NATO and Washington informally, with the question of how to prevent a humanitarian disaster.

Both the civilian and military command sides of UNPROFOR by then were nearly useless. Akashi, the civilian head of the whole operation, reflexively urged extreme caution regarding the use of force; he was convinced that that was the not the way to deal with the Serbs. He once compared Serbia with 1941 Japan, nations, he said, encircled by hostile forces and compelled to fight; and he claimed a special ability to understand the Serbs as fellow "orientals." With rare exception, UN military commanders, when not openly faulting the Muslims, prided themselves on their "complete impartiality and evenhandedness." And both Akashi and the UN military insisted, in a couple instances when force was used against Serbian targets, that Serbian commanders be warned well in advance. In September 1994, a senior UNPROFOR commander even issued an after-the-fact apology to Mladic for the shooting of a Serbian tank. It was pathetic. Getting the UN to agree to do anything involving real fore was virtually impossible.

But getting back to Bihac, within NATO, that crisis further heightened an already bitter debate between Washington and its UNPROFOR-participating allies over bombing as an option. There were some extremely nasty sessions in Brussels, with the U.S. on the hot seat, and recriminations flying. The MASH was even pulled into the fray at one point.

Q: The U.S. military hospital at Zagreb Airport?

NEITZKE: America's underutilized, all-but-token contribution to UNPROFOR. By intention, the MASH was situated too far from the action in Bosnia ever to play more than a tangential role. And this irritated some of the UNPROFOR contingents. To make their point, the French, for example, once dropped five badly injured Bosnians off at the door of the MASH. Treating Bosnians, or Croats, for that matter, was not within the MASH's limited mandate, but in this case the French left them no choice. And around the time of the Bihac episode, the UN appealed to Washington to allow MASH medical personnel to helicopter into the edge of the conflict area. You'd have thought they were asking for human sacrifices the way the Pentagon nitpicked this request and heavily caveated their strictly one-time approval.

All of this rankled within NATO, contributing to the crisis of confidence in U.S. leadership in late 1994 and early 1995. This was at a point when NATO was drifting anyway, still looking for a clear, galvanizing, post-Soviet strategic perspective. On the ground in Bosnia, the UNPROFOR contingents of certain of our NATO allies were quietly laying plans and cutting deals - with the Serbs mainly - to facilitate their withdrawal if the situation deteriorated much further. Meanwhile, in the Senate, efforts to force a unilateral U.S. lifting of the arms embargo on the Bosnian Muslims were beginning to pick up steam, which was feeding our allies' unease.

Q: The way you describe it it sounds like the United States is caught out there huffing and puffing and doing nothing while our NATO allies were doing the heavy lifting. But at the same time it sounds like our NATO allies got themselves into something, they got in way over their heads and they were not really doing much except to provide targets.

NEITZKE: Well, that's largely the case, except that it's not fair to say that the British and French UNPROFOR contingents, for example, and a few others were merely targets. They helped keep a lot of people alive. But UNPROFOR overall was clearly not up to the task. Some contingents were just along for the ride, others - some of the African units come to mind - were there for the pay, the money, and others, such as the Russians in Sector East, acted as though they were in cahoots with the Serbs. It was a motley crew, many of whom were essentially hostages in waiting. But go back to 1991 when the Croatian War broke out and the Europeans insisted on taking this on without U.S. leadership. As I've said, there was no historical precedent to suggest they could do so successfully. But that didn't bother us. We wanted to stay out. And we stayed out. But as the situation got worse in Bosnia, yes, we were huffing and puffing and pontificating about the desirability of bombing, but still we refused to join our NATO allies on the ground and to lead. And we were grateful that UNPROFOR, including Allied contingents, was there. It gave us an out.

But by late 1994 European attitudes on Bosnia had changed. One began hearing strained rationalizations for the looming fiasco. I recall a couple of dinners late that year in which I got into somewhat heated exchanges with several European Ambassadors. A couple spouted the UNPROFOR line that Muslims had been shelling themselves in Sarajevo and deserved no sympathy. One commented that Bosnia's demise was perhaps for the best because if it survived it would likely become a Muslim state, which was not in Europe's interest. Another argued that Bosnia had never really existed at all, hence trying to hold it together was a fool's errand. He said that Serb-cleansed parts of Bosnia should be allowed to confederate with Belgrade. Another claimed it was "pretentious" even to suggest that Yugoslavia's breakup could have been prevented. They were saying, in essence, we came, we did our best, we gave these people better than they deserved, and they blew it, all of them. It's not going to be on our conscience.

At this same time, late 1994 and early 1995, there was a steady drumbeat on the front pages and op-ed pages of major American papers that Clinton basically had no policy on Bosnia. The Clinton team's hope, illusion really, that they could preserve at least a modicum of alliance solidarity while strengthening the Bosnians, through Iranian arms deliveries and so forth, and keep the Serbs at bay, through sanctions enforcement and other means, had met the reality of our allies' raw anger over U.S. hypocrisy and the Serbs nearly complete sway over UNPROFOR on the ground. One could, and did, counter European criticism of our absence in Bosnia by noting the many other areas of the globe where we, but not they, were committed. But it was clear to everyone in that period that the alliance was in trouble.

Moreover, Bosnia was undermining perceptions of Clinton's foreign policy and national security competence more generally. This period is reportedly when Clinton began leaning heavily and angrily on Lake to come up with new options, options for asserting U.S. leadership, for getting the Serbs to halt their ethnic cleansing, and for getting the Allies and U.S. editorial writers off his back. One effort, which had been percolating for awhile, was to try to get Milosevic to seal off the border between Serbia proper and the Serbian-held parts of Bosnia in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions. Ultimately, despite persistent, dubious reports by some UN and even U.S. border monitors that the Serbs were complying, this effort came to naught.

An offshoot of the Administration's flailing about for a new direction on Bosnia was the sending of Bob Frasure - my London predecessor, then an EUR DAS under Holbrooke - to Belgrade for extended talks aimed at inducing Milosevic to rein in Karadzic and Mladic. Again, the only real carrot Bob had to dangle was an amelioration of the sanctions regime, but Milosevic refused to bite. Think about it, though. So morally contorted had our search for an "out" on Bosnia become that we were willing, even eager, to paint Milosevic, a first-order war criminal, as a potential good guy, a peacemaker. Bob spent countless hours in Belgrade negotiating, if you could call it that, with this megalomaniac, a doomed assignment that Bob confided he loathed. When Bob would report that his effort was going nowhere, however, and would recommend he be recalled, he'd typically be told no; he had to stay and try to bring Milosevic around. Again, it was critical to our non-engagement policy always to have an ongoing peace effort to point to. And for much of early 1995, along with the floundering Contact Group, Bob's was that effort.

Q: Meeting with detestable people is what diplomats sometimes have to do, I mean...

NEITZKE: Of course. Occasionally dealing with thoroughly disgusting human beings is part of the job. But such dealings shouldn't be indiscriminate. And they shouldn't be used mainly as a smokescreen for a policy devoid of political will. What's the foreseeable end of such dealings, how likely is a beneficial outcome, with whom is it worthwhile meeting, when, and for how long? These questions matter. And how should you comport yourself when dealing with a guy responsible for the deaths of tens or hundreds of thousands of people? This aspect of many of our half-hearted, sporadic diplomatic bursts on Bosnia always troubled me. The endless, fruitless, humiliating hours that U.S. diplomats spent chatting up Karadzic in gilded salons in Geneva early in the war, as his henchmen were butchering, literally butchering, and raping thousands of Muslims. The countless trips by Western or UN supplicants up to the Serb stronghold of Pale outside Sarajevo, pleading for this or that concession from Karadzic or Mladic. The ordeal Bob was put through with Milosevic. Is there a moral or psychological or practical cost to that sort of diplomacy? Even Holbrooke was apparently bothered enough by this aspect of the job to let his negotiating team decide for themselves whether to shake hands with these criminals, saying that he personally preferred not to. He made a curious distinction, however, between Milosevic, on the one hand, and Karadzic and Mladic.

I should mention, in this regard, the trip that ex-president Carter made to Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Pale near the end of 1994. I attended a tense lunch that Peter gave for the Carters and their entourage during their brief stopover in Zagreb. Ex-Ambassador Harry Barnes was Carter's main staffer for the trip. The tenseness arose over the question whether Carter ought to undertake the effort at all - he was not doing this at Clinton's behest; I think he'd been put up to this by American friends of Serbia. Peter questioned whether it might not undermine Administration efforts to isolate Pale and whether Karadzic wasn't likely to use Carter for his own propagandistic ends. I described the kinds and scale of crimes for which Karadzic and his men were personally responsible. Carter replied that, whatever the outcome of his effort, he would not excuse or exonerate potential war criminals. But he wouldn't be budged on his trip; he was going no matter what. It was clear in Barnes' separate exchange with me, however, that Carter had no real game plan, no set objectives. Barnes kept asking me what I thought Carter could realistically hope to accomplish. So, did Carter's effort meet, say, the test of dealing directly with war criminals only if there were a reasonable expectation of a substantial, positive outcome? At the time, Washington itself was so brain dead on Bosnia that to suggest Carter was interfering with Administration strategy was a huge stretch. In the event, the Serbs did use his visit for propaganda and although Carter made much of the supposed ceasefire commitment he'd won, which did dampen tensions for a moment, Serbian forces began violating it almost immediately. So was his trip worth the effort?

Q: Or Ambassador Frasure's approach to Milosevic also, I take it you would question.

NEITZKE: Yes, well, Bob did his duty. And it was around that time, in early 1995, that the exhaustive, definitive CIA study, the one that said the Serbs were guilty of at least 90 percent of the killing, raping, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, surfaced in the Times. Clinton himself publicly bridled when journalists then juxtaposed his effort to woo Milosevic with the CIA study's damning implication that Milosevic was the father of the Bosnian genocide. For Bob, as you know, it ended tragically later that summer, when he died in an accident trying to get into Sarajevo in a UN convoy after we'd failed again to persuade Milosevic, this time to get his Bosnian Serb friends to grant them, the Holbrooke-Frasure party, safe passage into the Bosnian capital for talks.

Apologists for the early Clinton Administration stance on Bosnia, the two and a half years from January 1992 to the summer of 1995, occasionally portray this late 1994-early 1995 period as the belated genesis of a clear, comprehensive Bosnia strategy that ultimately led to Dayton. But anyone who knew what was happening on the ground, was reading the cable traffic, and was talking with senior visitors from Washington knows that that take on history is fantasy. The Clinton Administration had no policy on Bosnia worthy of the name until mid-late-summer 1995, after the Serbs' humiliation of UNPROFOR - tying members of UNPROFOR contingents to bridges and other potential bombing targets around Sarajevo. After the UN's criminal failure at Srebrenica and the resulting execution of some 8,000 Muslim men and boys. After the especially traumatizing deaths of Frasure, Kruzel, and Drew on Mt. Igman. After it had become plain that Senator Dole had the votes to override a threatened Clinton veto of arms embargo-lifting legislation. And after Clinton had taken fully on board the political implications of his earlier pledge of up to 25,000 U.S. troops, if necessary, to facilitate the withdrawal of UNPROFOR. So Clinton faced the choice of either finally getting serious with the Serbs or dispatching 25,000 U.S. troops to help with a dangerous and ignominious UNPROFOR extrication amid an imploding Bosnia. That was it. That's when he finally got serious, when getting serious at last became his least inexpedient option.

Q: You were speaking about the kinds of threats you all in the Embassy faced. Talk about that, what you were doing about them and so forth.

NEITZKE: As we moved into 1995, those of us responsible for the security of the Embassy community and other Americans in Croatia began to consider even more seriously what we'd need to do under different scenarios. The Embassy had been growing by leaps and bounds. We had official Americans in several locales around the city. We spent a lot of time nailing down the details in our evacuation plan and dry running it. It's a lot more complicated than one would have thought. The U.S. military collaborated with us on some of this, even planning contingency helicopter evacuations out of Cmrok, the large park that lay between the Ambassador's residence and mine. And I briefed the Embassy staff, dependents, American School staff, and others on how we saw the situation, the security threats facing us, and the kinds of events that might trigger a partial or complete evacuation. The latter was bit tricky because I was limited in what I could say about the growing threat we faced from Iranian-supported terrorist groups. Most people were focused on the danger of renewed fighting between Zagreb and the Krajina Serbs. Only over time was I able, obliquely, to raise their awareness of this other, potentially more acute threat.

Q: And the nature of that threat was, again?

NEITZKE: Surveillance, including filming, and advanced operational planning for attacks on official Americans. We had some rare, sensitive, multiple source information on this in very nearly real time. One of these, for example, confirmed surveillance of the vehicle, the mini-bus, that transported our kids to and from the American School, a vehicle, by the way, nearly identical to one that affiliated terrorists had recently blown up near the American Consulate General in Karachi. That sort of warning gets one's attention, makes things a bit personal, since I had two kids on the Zagreb school bus. But that was only one of several warnings, all among the less heralded consequences of the Iranian "green light" decision.

Q: Well, were we approaching the Croatian Government to say watch these guys, the terrorists, because, you know, you have your relationship with Tehran, but do not let them...

NEITZKE: Kill us? Yes, we were asking for this and that additional protection from the Croats, but we weren't addressing the root of the problem.

I recall that Dick Holbrooke, confronted by a Congressional Committee Chairman with a breaking LA Times story about the dangers the "green light" decision had forced on official Americans in Croatia, nervously sought to downplay it, disputing the report's allegation that the threat to those of us on the ground had increased exponentially. He acknowledged that the heightened Iranian presence in Croatia had increased the threat to Americans there. But he argued that we'd taken measures to meet that threat. Well, yes and no. To the limited extent we were able - we were very exposed in Zagreb - we did take additional steps, we scrambled. I immediately terminated bus transportation to our kids' school, for example. As I said, I briefed the community, albeit in elliptical terms due to the sensitivity of the information we had. We began to limit the movements of various officers, including the Marine Guards. We posted extra security, or got the Croats to post guards, on various residences. We sent at least one officer under acute threat out of the country. We got the Croats to ratchet up security on Peter and his residence. And we did other things, but still, most of us most of the time were sitting ducks.

Q: But you say this did not address the root of the problem.

NEITZKE: The terrorists themselves. What were they doing there? Why were we tolerating it? Why weren't we demanding, that the Croats kick these guys out of their country, or else. Peter said he feared - and assumed Washington would fear - that taking that step might lead to disruption of the Iranian arms flow. For me this was beyond the pale. How low had we sunk as an Embassy and as a government if we were afraid to take eminently sensible measures to defend our own people because that might offend an anti-American, terrorist-backing Tehran regime whose arms flow made it possible for the Clinton Administration to stand aside watching genocidal slaughter? Near the end, in April 1995, with Peter out of town and barely acquiescing, I laid out all my concerns, and the specific intelligence to back each up, in a cable to the Department, stating that unless they gave us orders for a forceful demarche to Tudjman, we would have no alternative but to withdraw all official Americans from Croatia. I got the instruction I wanted and made the demarche with Tudjman, who had all of his key security officials present. I insisted that he rein in the Iranians and their terrorist buddies before something god awful happened for which we would hold him and his government responsible. I said that, in the absence of effective Croatian action to safeguard us, all official Americans would have to be withdrawn. Tudjman got it. He knew we were serious. But still, he didn't want to rock the boat with the Iranians; the arms flow was benefiting Croatia itself as it geared up for Operation Storm.

Before much of anything changed, the Croats moved militarily to retake Sector West - this was in very early May 1995 - the Serbs began rocketing Zagreb, and we quickly evacuated all family members and non-essential personnel. While this greatly reduced the number of American targets, it didn't remove the terrorist threat.

Q: Well, it seems that you and Peter did not see eye to eye on the gravity of the Iranian threat?

NEITZKE: No, we didn't. And this is where, near the end, our otherwise generally strong, collaborative, working relationship nearly came apart. Peter's view of the Iranian threat was always tempered by his Iran-Iraq prism and the role he had played in helping to expose the horrors that Saddam Hussein had perpetrated on the Kurds. Even as Iranian-backed terrorists began surveilling him, Peter insisted that it made no sense for Iran to hit us in Croatia at that time. But by then Peter himself was living in a fairly tight security cocoon.

My view was that the surveillance, and the warnings we were getting through sensitive channels, spoke for themselves as to the threat we faced. It might not make sense for a clear-headed strategist in Tehran to strike against Americans in Croatia just then, but who knew what games others might be playing, what points someone might be trying to score, by the terrorist elements that the "green light" decision had unleashed in Croatia. Since when are all terrorist acts precisely logical from a Western perspective? This all came out during the various Congressional investigations in 1996. The Agency and I were of the same view, by the way, on the urgency, the immediacy, of the threat we faced. Zagreb was way up on Washington's possible terrorist action watch list during this period.

Q: Did the press, the Western press, notice, report on, the weapons flow and all? And the, as you have described it, the burgeoning Iranian presence in Croatia?

NEITZKE: They noticed it, and there were reports, but it wasn't covered extensively. And the fact that Washington had given the go ahead wasn't known or reported on at all. And behind the scenes, among the various U.S. Government agencies with an interest in this matter, the situation appeared even murkier. The reason, as I said, is that State and NSC had lied to CIA and the Pentagon about their role in this. They maintained that Washington had not approved this activity. Yet before long it became clear to CIA and the Pentagon that Iranian arms were flowing in, and lots of them. And they were picking up reports that Washington indeed had had a hand in this. Rumors were flying, including one that I alluded to earlier, that the USG itself was running the whole operation, that we had launched a large program, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, to arm the Bosnian Muslims.

Against that backdrop, things took an unfortunate turn within the Embassy. Certain Washington agencies ordered their top people in the Embassy to find out all they could about any role the U.S. may have played, or any role other officials in the Embassy, including Galbraith, might be playing, in these arms flows. State told Peter to keep everything he knew about the arms flows, including the "green light" decision, from these very people at post. Even more disturbingly, I was told that that Holbrooke had advised Susak and, through him, another Croatian official, not to discuss any aspect of the arms flows with certain, other agency Embassy officials, because, presumably, he felt they couldn't be trusted. How would you like to try to keep the team together, which was my job, with signals like that going to senior officials of your host government?

Because of the lack of consensus, the outright mistrust and lies told at nearly the highest levels of the Clinton Administration on this issue, and Lake's and Talbott's clumsy efforts to keep the DCI and Defense Secretary in the dark, there sprouted this bizarre situation among certain Embassy Zagreb officers of surveillance, suspicions, allegations, and tension. Peter was in an untenable position. As I said, he was charged with covering up the "green light" decision while other Embassy officials had been tasked by their agencies to find out what was going on. It was my job to keep the lid on all of this, keep people acting professionally toward one another, and try to keep everyone's focus on the work we were being paid to do. That was a tough act, and it went on for quite a while, at least until the initial investigation of the "green light" decision and its consequences by PIFIAB, or the IOB, in early 1995, I believe. Later, in 1996, the Congressional investigations got into this aspect of the "green light" decision as well; careers were on the line, not mine but others I cared about, and I did the best I could to place the blame for this aspect of the fiasco precisely where it belonged, on Washington's, the Administration's, doorstep. From the feedback I got from a number of House Intelligence Committee members of both parties, I succeeded.

Q: Surely, that would have some effect on your own career also.

NEITZKE: I remember being asked that question at the time by several House Intel Committee Members, including Porter Goss - who would later briefly head the Agency under Bush - did I fear retaliation for my testimony? I told them no, but more out of visceral disgust over the whole affair than from any sober analysis of whither my career.

Q: Well, before we move on, just one thing. You have mentioned Deputy Secretary Talbott. What about Secretary Christopher? What roles did he play in this?

NEITZKE: That was strange. I never came across evidence of Christopher's hand in any of this. Presumably he was in the loop, but whatever involvement he had remained hidden.

Q: Okay, well, talk a little about the evacuation. How did that go?

NEITZKE: Once we made the decision, it went very smoothly. We'd practiced it, prepared the community, gone over everything. Our consul, Dennis Hearne, deserves a lot of credit for that. We later learned from those in the Department who handle evacuations that ours had been nearly a textbook case of how to do it.

But in the days leading up to that decision, it wasn't at all clear where things would end up. I should mention that, among those I'd briefed on the security situation in early 1995 was the staff of the American School. Someone there asked me when I thought the threat would be greatest. I said I thought it would be if and when the Croats moved on the UNPAs and said that that could come as soon as late April-early May. I had no special foreknowledge of that; it was just my best guess. A day or two later, however, an anonymous telegram arrived at the Embassy, implicitly threatening me if I further disclosed Croatian government plans. Apparently I had called the Croatian move against Sector West almost to the day. That fed rumors around town that the Americans had the details of the Croatian move, that we were in on it, may even have assisted with it.

To add fuel to that fire, on the day the Croats did move against Sector West, I got a very early morning call from Herrick, our Defense Attache, who'd been summoned to the Defense Ministry and been told that the Croatian military action was imminent. It had probably already begun. Peter had left town the day before and was hours away at the coast when this alert came in from Herrick, so I took a number of actions, including, as Chairman of the Board of the American School, closing the school until further notice. The Principal and staff began phoning all the students' parents telling them there would be no school but offering no explanation. At that moment, most of Zagreb was unaware of the impending military action. Only hours later did it become clear to all why I'd done what I did. That confirmed in some minds that the Americans had to have been involved in some way in the Croatian military move.

We should probably return now to the activities of the retired U.S. military group I mentioned earlier, MPRI, the guys who had the private contract with the Croatian Defense Ministry to provide officer training. When they first came to town, the head of MPRI, it may have been Vuono ...

Q: General Vuono, who had been Army Chief of Staff?

NEITZKE: Yes. I think it was Vuono who gave me a long briefing on what MPRI was going to be doing for the Croats, with instructors who'd be more or less hanging out in the Croatian Defense Ministry. He wasn't asking for our approval or concurrence; MPRI was a private concern, although the Pentagon must have helped to arrange it, or at least given its okay. He said they'd be teaching Croatian officers various professional skills, accounting , for example. That seemed odd, but he mentioned military discipline as well, the laws governing warfare and respect for the rights of non-combatants. But nothing on military tactics or strategy. I asked a few questions, but it wasn't clear whether I was getting the whole story. I'm still not sure. Nor do I think that even Peter, to this day, knows exactly what MPRI did. Maybe it was as innocent and limited as Vuono, or whoever it was, described it. It seems unlikely, however, that that many ex-U.S. military personnel could have spent that much time in such close proximity to a Croatian officer corps on the brink of going to war and never talked shop.

So did MPRI, as I know some Serbs maintain, not only offer professional training to the Croats, but actively participate in, even orchestrate the planning for the liberation of Sector West, or for Operation Storm? Or, setting MPRI aside, did the USG provide real time intel assistance, and perhaps more than that, to the Croats during Storm, as a couple well-placed Croats have apparently testified? I saw nothing to indicate conclusively MPRI involvement in the liberation of Sector West, and I departed Zagreb over a month before Storm. And I'd had almost no contact with MPRI after that initial briefing.

Q: Storm, again, was what?

NEITZKE: Operation Storm, the Croatian move on Sectors North and South in August 1995. There were aspects to the Croats' early May move against Sector West, however, that suggested they'd taken on board someone's warnings about cleaning up their act, literally. There had been some artillery exchanges and skirmishing in the days leading up to the Croatian move, which, in the event, they characterized as a "police action" aimed merely at opening up the main east-west highway. Obviously it was much more than that, but the point I wanted to make is that before the press or international observers of any stripe could descend on newly-liberated - the Serbs would say cleansed - Sector West, the Croats had rapidly and systematically - reportedly using refrigeration vans in some cases - cleaned up much of the physical evidence of the fighting and nearly all evidence of non-combatant casualties, including removing the bodies and hosing away the blood. I'm not sure whether they even attempted such an effort during the much larger scale Storm; there was evidently plenty of evidence left behind in that case, including non-combatant dead, to prompt Hague Tribunal indictments of Croatian commanders.

The Croats' move to open Sector West began in the early morning hours of May 1. At that point the Embassy community was in a high state of alert. The Department had long since approved our request for authorized departure of family members.

Q: Explain authorized departure.

NEITZKE: I think the term is authorized departure. Perhaps it's voluntary departure. In any case, it's meant to address situations where there's a heightened level of threat to American officials and their families, a situation which the post and the Department don't think yet merits an ordered departure of dependents and non-essential personnel. Authorized departure had been in effect for Zagreb for some time prior to May 1. People could temporarily depart at Department expense and stay out with certain allowances. Anybody who felt they or their family members needed to get out could do so. But despite the level of concern, acute in a couple cases, people were extremely reluctant to depart voluntarily, to be the first to go, I suppose, or to be the only ones to go early, despite my urging them to do whatever they felt was necessary in their own circumstances. So there developed among some Embassy officers a desire for immediate, ordered departure, which I guess they felt would remove any stigma or whatever they might have felt from sending their dependants out. Nonetheless, I wasn't ready to recommend ordered departure, and Peter deferred to me.

Once the Croatian military action began on May 1, however, that issue became more urgent. The question before Peter and me and the rest of the country team as we considered our security options on that eerily quiet May 1 afternoon was whether to seek a Department-ordered evacuation of all family members and non-essential personnel. Peter was ready to move on this, as were most of the others. But I still wasn't and I fought against it. For me the issue turned on how one read the intentions of the Serbs in Knin. Would they respond to Croatia's move by loosing on Zagreb the rockets that had long been readied in Sector North? Or would they hold off on the rockets, figuring that such a retaliatory step might trigger a much larger Croatian move on Sectors North and South? Or play for international sympathy? Virtually the entire UN team in Croatia, Akashi and his staff, were sympathetic to them and had strongly condemned Croatia's "destabilizing" move as well as its intransigence during fevered ceasefire negotiations. Nor were we sure that the rockets could even hit downtown Zagreb; the ones they'd fired in the fall of 1993 had only reached the outskirts of the city.

Q: Now, who controlled these rockets?

NEITZKE: That's another question we had. Was operational control wholly in Knin's hands, or, more likely, would Belgrade, Milosevic probably, have to give the go-ahead? And was he likely to do so? I didn't think so. And I concluded, basically, that if the decision were Knin's alone, it wouldn't opt for suicide, at least not immediately. At that time, we heard from one of Tudjman's closest advisers that they too, Tudjman's inner circle, were convinced Zagreb wouldn't be rocketed. And after it was rocketed on May 2, they told us they were convinced it wouldn't be rocketed again, but it was. What I interpreted this to mean is that they were in contact with Belgrade and had received certain assurances. So either I was wrong, or they were snookered by Belgrade, or Belgrade had lost control over its friends in Knin.

Q: Well, what about your own family, their safety?

NEITZKE: They weren't anxious to leave. We'd been living with a significant amount of threat for three years by that time and had grown accustomed to it. We had, as I said earlier, strangely normal lives. I suppose my family was an example, though. I had a better sense than others of the various threats we faced, and my family was still there. So that may have deterred others from leaving. I don't know. But we'd made contingency plans by that point to get our kids temporarily back into their old school in Washington if the worst came, and some others had as well.

Frankly, on May 1, even as the Croatian attack to retake Sector West was underway, I was still just as focused on the terrorist threat confronting us. And I wasn't alone in that. And when the rockets came the next morning, mid-morning May 2, I was sitting in my office, windows open, a beautiful spring day. The explosions sounded like very loud, sharp, cracks, right next to us or very close by. The building shook. And in that instant, my first thought was that the terrorists had finally struck. I later learned from a contact with intimate ties to Croatian security services that those services too, with offices close to us, in that first instant, thought the American Embassy had finally been bombed.

Although it would be some minutes before we knew what in fact had happened, the Serbs had launched some of their rockets, and cluster bombs were exploding in various parts of downtown Zagreb, some as close as 75-80 yards from the Embassy. People responded instinctively but differently. Some fled instantly for the safety of the thick-walled, cavernous Embassy basement. Others took a moment to secure classified materials and make sure everyone was heading for safety before joining them. It fairly quickly became clear that we hadn't been hit, but we didn't know about possible casualties outside the Embassy, those who'd been out and about when the Serbs struck. Herrick soon joined us and reported that several parts of the downtown area had been hit and that there were fatalities. We'd been practicing with a walkie-talkie serial contact system for some time and in that manner were eventually able to account for everyone in the official community. No deaths, no injuries. But the need for ordered departure of dependants and non-essential personnel was no longer disputable.

We informed the Department by phone that we intended to implement our evacuation plan as soon as the dust cleared and it seemed prudent. There was no argument; they sent the authorization immediately. I got on the walkie-talkie system, told the families what little we then knew, and told them, along with personnel designated non-essential, to be ready to evacuate on very short notice. In the event, we were able to give them about two hours before they were to assemble for departure by bus from the Ambassador's residence. They all left, including my family, later that afternoon. Some of them, including my family, since my tour was by then nearing completion, never came back. And that was kind of a strange and difficult thing for them. No good-byes to friends and schoolmates and so forth. The Department doesn't authorize a return simply to pack out, so I would do that on my own.

Q: So did things calm down then, or...?

NEITZKE: The Serbian rockets struck again the following day, again hitting several parts of the downtown area in the general vicinity of the Embassy, including near a children's hospital, the national theater, and a large market place, Britanski Trg I think, where we often shopped and through which many of us drove a couple times a day. This was the point at which Peter tried to contact officials in Knin, with whom he'd dealt in the Z-4 effort, and at least implicitly threatened them with U.S. retaliation if they hit the Embassy or killed Americans. I'm not sure that would have had much effect on Knin at that point, however. It was obvious that the game was up, that their part of Milosevic's Greater Serbia experiment would soon be history, and that the repeated, indiscriminate attacks on Zagreb were merely cynical retribution, intended to inflict pain on the civilian population. The Krajina Serbs had quickly forfeited whatever claim they might have had to international sympathy.

Q: How was Washington reacting? What were you telling Tudjman?

NEITZKE: As we'd done for nearly four years at that point, we urged Tudjman to show restraint. And we meant it, but our constant pleas had become a borderline pro forma exercise. Washington, and we, still didn't fully appreciate how strong the Croats had become militarily, and there were fears that any move by Tudjman would be met by a stronger countermove by Serbian forces. We didn't want another hot front opening up in the post-Yugo wars. But as Croatian forces quickly prevailed in Sector West, and did so, as I indicated, in a way that didn't leave much evidence of criminal excesses behind, some in Washington began to see the light, to perceive that this first major successful pushback against a four-year Serbian offensive, if it didn't go too far too fast, was not only tolerable but a positive development. This U.S. reaction to the Croats' move on Sector West, however, was before, and was not part of, whatever may have subsequently passed between, say, Holbrooke and Susak, or Perry and Susak, or MPRI and the Croatian Defense Ministry, regarding whatever green light we may have given, or assistance we may have rendered, to the later Operation Storm.

Q: Well, this issue came up in the trial of some Croats at the Hague Tribunal, did it not?

NEITZKE: That's my understanding, that the accused Croatian officers, on trial for crimes committed during Storm, claimed that Washington was aiding them in this offensive. I don't know the truth of all that. Holbrooke, I know, says it's fiction, that Washington strongly cautioned Tudjman not to undertake Storm, fearing that Belgrade, the JNA, would be drawn in. Given how Storm unfolded, however, and the follow-on strike into Bosnia with help from the Bosnian army, and the manner in which we finally did intervene to get the Croats to halt short of Banja Luka, I find it hard to believe that we'd been sitting this out entirely, let alone demanding throughout that Tudjman halt this action.

There's one more thing in this regard that has always troubled me in trying to figure out what Holbrooke or Perry or someone else may have privately advised the Croats in the late spring or summer of 1995 on the possibility of their taking military action. That's the surprising note that Bob Frasure is reported to have passed to Holbrooke at a luncheon with Tudjman two days before the Mt. Igman tragedy. This would be mid-August, when Storm was already underway. Bob is said to have referred to the Croats as "junkyard dogs" we had "hired" because we were "desperate," urging Holbrooke that we not order them to stop their offensive. I have to assume that there was something more to that relationship, something about our backing of or involvement in Storm that has yet to come out.

Q: That happened after you had departed?

NEITZKE: Yes.

Q: Let us go back then. After the rocket attacks on Zagreb and the partial embassy evacuation, how did life change for those of you who remained behind?

NEITZKE: That all happened just two months before I was set to depart. For me personally, it didn't return to anything resembling normal - even what had previously passed for normal. We didn't know how many rockets the Serbs might still have. Obviously they felt no compunction about firing them, so we had to plan for the worst. We basically moved most remaining personnel up to Peter's residence - up the hill and, we hoped, out of range - for a few days, perhaps a week. We may have continued to do visa work at the Embassy downtown for a few hours a day. Trying to do any serious work out of the Residence, however, proved nearly impossible and, there having been no further rocket attacks for a week or so, we moved operations back to the embassy. We tried, for what little good that might have done, to keep as many people as possible out of the more vulnerable front offices. But frankly, if we'd taken a hit in that period it wouldn't have much mattered where you were sitting. The building was old and, notwithstanding our efforts to shore it up, still not all that structurally sound. After a couple weeks in that cramped situation, everyone went back to their old offices and we got on with it.

The downtown area was much quieter than before; it seemed almost deserted at times. People were spooked. It didn't return to anything like the way it had been in my final two months. Outside of work, we tried to avoid the downtown area as much as possible.

Work in that final period focused, obviously, on our security situation, both the possibility of further rocket attacks and the lingering terrorist threat, and on what Tudjman planned next. His move on Sector West was a game-changer. No one expected him to stop there. Some historians point to Storm and its substantial reversal of Serbian gains as the game-changer, and it was a game-changer of a different magnitude. But it was the move on Sector West that broke the ice; it occurred when there was no other prospect in sight of anything happening in the area that would alter the fundamental equation or get the international community off the dime. So that got a lot of our attention. In addition, with our evacuated families and non-essential personnel in various states of limbo, keeping them informed and negotiating with the Department over whether and when it might be safe for them to return took a lot of time. And Peter tried to keep the Z-4 process going, with now even more limited prospects.

Q: Were the Croatians able to launch attacks of any kind against Belgrade?

NEITZKE: Directly? Against the city?

Q: Yes. You said something about strategic weapons.

NEITZKE: I'm not sure what they'd have been capable of, other than perhaps bombing missions. And they didn't have that many aircraft at the time. So no. They never attacked Belgrade. Tudjman might have wanted to strike back after the rocket attacks on Zagreb. He probably did. But he kept his cool, opting instead for Storm and a bet that Milosevic wouldn't respond directly, that he would abandon the Krajina. And Tudjman was proven right. As for strategic weapons, that had been mentioned in the context of Croatia's new ties with Iran, but I'm not aware that anything ever came of that. They did get some interesting weapons, but I don't think any would qualify as strategic.

Q: Well, there is something I wanted to get to before we leave your time in Zagreb. I have done a long interview with Peter Galbraith. He had something of a reputation in his Senate job, as I understand it, for going beyond his brief. Did you see any of that in Zagreb, that he was pulling Senatorial strings, doing things to push the Croatian cause or anything?

NEITZKE: Did he push the Croatian cause? In my own efforts to accurately portray what was happening in Croatia and Bosnia, to get the proportionality of criminal behavior and guilt right, I was sometimes accused, not directly but plainly enough, of advocating for Croatia, you know, the crime of clientism. But I wasn't. I was just trying to get the facts before senior Washington officials convinced that the Croats had to be acting as badly as the Serbs. And later, the comprehensive CIA study bore out the accuracy of our reporting.

Whatever his reputation may have been, Peter saw himself as a foreign affairs professional, and he was, and he came out determined to do a good job and to have an impact on things. Nothing wrong with that. He'd been told in the Department to be tough with the Croats, who in the summer of 1993, as I've said, had been going after Muslims in Bosnia. Peter's initial emphasis was both as defender of Croatian sovereignty in the occupied areas, the UNPAs, and critic of what some Croats were doing in Bosnia. I think that was an appropriate balance.

I've already suggested that on an occasion or two Peter got too close to Tudjman personally. But that's different from clientism. On the Iranian "green light" decision, Peter strongly backed our telling Tudjman unequivocally to go ahead, which is what Tudjman would have preferred to hear, but Peter's stance there was far more out of sympathy for the Muslims than for Croatia's self-interest in the deal. On Croatia's move into Sector West and preparations for Storm, although Peter dutifully executed his instructions urging restraint, his personal sympathies were with the Croats. Anyone who'd sat through two years of policy malaise, hoping for a break in the stalemate, a pushback of the Serbs, might easily have felt the same, which would not necessarily make him a Croatian partisan. And in his Z-4 effort, Peter took the interests of the Krajina Serbs into account to an extent that did not endear him to some in the Croatian Government. So, no, in sum, I don't think it's fair to say that Peter pushed Croatia's cause per se.

Now, on the question of whether Peter tried to work any levers in Washington while he was in Zagreb, if he tried, his efforts had no perceptible impact. Peter's view of Washington changed considerably over the two years we were together. He initially saw himself as a Clinton Administration and Democratic Party insider. He'd been sworn in at the White House by Vice President Gore. But he became increasingly frustrated with our policy drift, and worse. The ignominy of it weighed heavily. And the callous way Washington treated him during the Iranian "green light" affair clearly troubled him. He was being hung out. I think he dealt with that as well as one could. Nor did Washington warmly embrace his Z-4 project. And later, it wasn't clear that he had Holbrooke's complete confidence; Dick appeared to be circumventing him occasionally in dealings with Susak and perhaps others. So I think, from the Washington angle, Zagreb was a sobering experience for Peter.

Q: Okay. You left when?

NEITZKE: July 1. That was ten days before the start of the mass murders at Srebrenica, over a month before Operation Storm was launched, a month and half before the Mt. Igman tragedy, and well before the Clinton Administration was forced, by these and the other events that I've mentioned, to get serious about Bosnia.

Q: Did the Croats, the Croatian government, or the diplomatic community note your departure in any way? Since you were...

NEITZKE: They did, actually. In addition to some farewell calls, Foreign Minister Granic and his wife took me to lunch. The German Ambassador, a guy I'd gotten to know very well, hosted a farewell dinner for me. And the Italian Ambassador and his wife fed me a couple dinners after my family was evacuated. And on the morning before I left, Tudjman asked me to come up to the Presidential Palace, as it was called, one of Tito's villas, and, with several of his Ministers and senior advisors and the Croatian press present, awarded me the Order of Prince Branimir.

Q: That sounds impressive.

NEITZKE: That depends. Tudjman's political opponents ridiculed him for his efforts to imbue the office of president with symbols of age and grandeur. For example, the elaborate uniforms worn by the guards at the Presidential Palace - even his calling it a palace was lampooned - were of Tudjman's design. As, reportedly, were the medals, or Orders, of merit or honor that Tudjman bestowed. The Branimir medal, however, was supposed to be reserved for departing Ambassadors. I think I was the sole exception to that. There was a ceremony, following which we sat down for a chat. This was still a pretty tense time, but Tudjman was relaxed. He asked me what advice I had for him. I told him I'd watched him closely for three years and was pretty sure he didn't take anyone's advice. I offered, however, that as shrewd as he'd been in getting independent Croatia on its feet and through the crises it had faced up until then, the future - this was before Storm, Dayton and everything - was likely to be even more challenging. And we talked about how far U.S.-Croatian relations had come - a sea change, really - since our first conversation three years earlier. Then we wished each other well, shook hands, and I left.

Q: What were you feeling, if anything comes to mind, when you departed Zagreb?

NEITZKE: That for three years I'd been watching up-close the effects of two U.S. Administrations' cowardice in the face of the worst humanitarian catastrophe in Europe since Hitler. That diplomacy, absent a credible threat to use force, or at least a credible demonstration of political will, is often worse than farce. That I'd done all I reasonably could, and then some, to try to get my government to do the right thing. But that I'd failed, at least in the near term. Along with most of the press, I had vastly overestimated the coercive power of shame, of conscience. I was ready to leave the Foreign Service at that point, not to resign in a huff, just to go. What was the point? I was never again likely to find myself in a job as intellectually, emotionally, and morally challenging and draining as what I'd just been through. And I'd witnessed how a few of the brightest, most highly thought of FSOs of my generation and the one preceding it had responded when confronted with their own career-threatening challenges, and it was not edifying. I had asked for and been granted a year's Leave Without Pay. My wife was going back to work, and I was looking forward to being a full-time dad.

Q: Had anything been offered you, jobs I mean, or had you made it known right away that you wanted to go on leave without pay?

NEITZKE: Before that year's bidding cycle had begun, a friend, an Assistant Secretary, had asked me to consider a Deputy Assistant Secretary job. I looked into that briefly, but couldn't see myself making that change just then. For me, and I knew it at the time, Zagreb had been the kind of job from which I couldn't just pick up and start afresh with something else. It was going to take a while. So, yes, I asked for LWOP up front and was granted it.

Q: You said you were ready to leave the Service. Did you mean that?

NEITZKE: Not literally. I meant I was fed up. I was questioning as I'd never before the institution in which I'd invested the bulk of my working life. I still felt that most FSOs most of the time did terrific work. There are few, if any, more dedicated groups in government. They do 98 percent of what they're asked to do with energy and creativity and fortitude and you name it. But there are instances when it's necessary to weight conscience against career, to take a stand. I was stunned by the number of respected, senior-level officers who easily put career above all else and by their uncanny ability to rationalize doing so.

Q: Rationalize it how?

NEITZKE: Most of them, it seemed, took quiet professional pride in their ability as cool, seasoned diplomats not to succumb to what they deemed "emotionalism," you know, the sort of distracting emotionalism that full-blown genocide can unleash in officers less well-grounded. These guys took an essentially patronizing view of the dissenters, or worse, clicked their heels, and went out and told the Congress, the press, and the American people whatever was necessary to put a cloak of respectability on a policy of expediency. I recall, in that regard, an exchange on Bosnia that Mike McCurry, the Department Spokesman, had with reporters in late 1994. They were badgering him, demanding to know how he could stand up there at the podium day after day and pretend that we were doing anything at all significant to stop Milosevic. And he answered, I'll never forget, "because I'm paid to engage in the absurd."

Q: Well, unfortunately, that is what we are called upon to do sometimes as diplomats, to state our government's case as best we can despite even grave personal qualms.

NEITZKE: I think we touched on this earlier, when we were talking about how policy gets made, and how useful one really is if he's too close to an issue, relates to it too emotionally. At that point you just have to back off. But I strongly disagree with the notion that an emotionally sterile, utterly dispassionate approach always serves best. There have to be limits. Realpolitik is not all that we're about as a nation. In dealing with something like genocide, let alone genocide in the shadow of the Holocaust, there has to come a point when your basic values kick in. I think we're best served as a nation by diplomats who neither go off on emotional tangents nor check their humanity at the door.

But it's a question that's always troubled me, whether you could be successful in the Service, keep rising through the ranks while dealing with tough, gut-wrenching issues, and keep your soul intact, as it were. When I led those few sessions on dissent in mid-career training at FSI after I retired, I would begin with remarks that I'd come across in the early 1970s by then-Under Secretary Macomber. Testifying before the Senate, he was asked what an FSO should do - Vietnam was then the focus of dissent - if he were asked to carry out a policy that he deeply opposed. Macomber responded that if one felt that strongly about it he probably shouldn't be a diplomat; he should be a teacher or a writer or an advocate of some sort. He quickly added, however, that if one decided he could live with "certain inhibitions" - his phrase - then he'd have the marvelous reward of a ringside seat at some of the greatest events of his day. I think that a lot of our best and brightest cling to that ringside seat at all costs.

Q: Well what happened to some of these FSOs, whom you keep referring to, the ones who took the careerist path on Bosnia as you say, defended the policy and...

NEITZKE: Nearly all of them did extremely well, actually, the senior officers we're referring to, I mean in terms of their onward Foreign Service careers. Lots of them were awarded with ambassadorships, ironically, in a couple cases, ambassadorships to the former Yugoslavia. Eagleburger got to be Secretary of State briefly. And on the military side too, nearly every senior officer who dutifully towed the line did extremely well. There's a pretty clear pattern there. I'm reminded from my research on the Holocaust of a similar pattern of reward for some senior people in the Department back then, men who'd held the line against admitting more Jews, who'd scoffed even at talk of rescue, and who'd steadfastly denied we knew about the Nazis' extermination program long after we did know. In the end, however, FDR fired EUR Assistant Secretary Breckenridge Long. At least there was that.

Q: There have been a number of books, loads of books in fact, some memoirs, written on experiences in the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Did you ever consider doing that? And lastly, now that you have the perspective of over a decade, are there any aspects of the conflict and what you did that you now see differently?

NEITZKE: How much more time do we have? I did think of doing a book. Some journalist friends even had a publisher get in touch with me, and we spoke a couple times, batting around ideas, what they'd most be interested in, what I felt I could do. We got to the point where they wanted an outline and, after some soul-searching, I decided I really didn't want to do it, at least not then. I was trying to work Zagreb out of my system, and I didn't want to descend again into that morass of anger and disappointment. But I'm a firm believer in the therapeutic value of writing things down, or airing them out, and this exercise with you is, I guess, my third and longest and probably my last effort to do that. So I'm grateful.

Q: The others were...

NEITZKE: The others were the long research paper I wrote in the Senior Seminar, which I guess we'll come to, comparing and contrasting the State Department's and the U.S. Government's responses to the Holocaust and Bosnia, which I titled "But Bosnia was not the Holocaust!" The second was a book done by Roger Cohen, "Hearts Grown Brutal," published in the fall of 1998.

Q: Writes for the New York Times.

NEITZKE: He does. I think he's the IHT foreign editor now. Roger was one of the many correspondents I got to know in Zagreb. I think he was technically Berlin bureau chief at the time. Later on he became chief foreign editor for the Times. We stayed in touch for a few years after I left Zagreb. When he was working on his book, I gave him a copy of my Senior Seminar paper, which he ended up quoting from at length. For anyone who has studied Yugoslavia going way back, "Hearts Grown Brutal" is a great read. Roger has a wonderful, at times almost poetic writing style. His treatment of Bosnia closely parallels my own. A sense of having helped inform his views relieved some of the pressure I felt to write something more elaborate myself.

The other question, on whether my perspective on what happened in Bosnia has changed, is more difficult. My fundamental take on what happened, and on the moral vacuity of our approach from 1992 to 1995, hasn't changed. But you learn more and your perspective broadens with time. We witnessed the war, the wars, from a certain vantage point. We weren't as attuned as the Bosnians themselves would have been, for example, to the war on a micro level, to the carnage and the corruption, for example, in arms dealing, food smuggling, and so on, to the innumerable deals cut at the local or village level among otherwise hostile factions that resulted in brief, ad hoc alliances that permitted some of these places to survive against all odds. And there are, of course, the many moving stories of loss, unbelievable hardship and even heroism that have come out. On the major outlines of what happened, however, history has shown that we got it right, and early on.

In mid-1995, Clinton was said to have been in a near-panic over what his failure of leadership on Bosnia might do to his reelection prospects a year later. I think Woodward in his book The Choice said Clinton then viewed Bosnia as a cancer on his Presidency, the old Nixon era characterization of Watergate. That Clinton's handling of Bosnia is now rated a stellar success by so many, most of whom either knew little at the time or remember nothing, is little short of obscene. That's the true miracle that Holbrooke worked at Dayton, transforming Clinton's Bosnia cancer of early 1995 into a grand plank of unmitigated success in his reelection platform of 1996. And now critics of our Iraq strategy - and god knows there's lots to be critical about - demand that we apply to Iraq the strategic insight and creative diplomacy that Clinton supposedly demonstrated in bringing peace to Bosnia. It boggles the mind. Galbraith and now even Biden are calling for the formal ethno-religious division of Iraq, supposedly drawing on lessons from the Clinton Administration's success with Bosnia. What a profound and potentially catastrophic historical distortion that is.

Lastly, I feel a lot better now than I did when departing Zagreb about the cumulative effect of all we did in those years on later policy. Some might dispute this, but I believe that we contributed critically to the public, congressional, and Administration mindset that guided our much firmer response to the Kosovo crisis, going to war with Serbia, even bombing Belgrade. There was cause enough to have done that in the way Milosevic treated the Albanian Kosovars, but I don't believe we actually would have absent the lingering humiliation and shame of our earlier three years of cowardice on Bosnia.

Q: Alright. You have left Zagreb. You are coming back. You know, Foreign Service Officers do not get paid that much. How do you manage to go on leave without pay, if I might ask?

NEITZKE: My FSO wife was going back to work after extended LWOP in Zagreb. We felt strongly that if we could afford to have a parent at home, then we should do that. And in any event, I really did want to spend as much time as I could with my kids. They were then 9, 7, and 4. I know that's hard for some people to understand, especially men; some of my colleagues in Zagreb couldn't believe it. And many dads, especially in what would be the prime of their career, don't have that opportunity, or don't feel they can afford it. But your kids are only young once and it's what I wanted to do and, after a bit of adjusting from a very different life, it worked out great.

Q: What job had your wife been paneled to?

NEITZKE: Career Development Officer in Personnel, or the name may have been changed to Human Resources by then. I don't recall.

Q: Okay, you spent a year on Leave Without Pay.

NEITZKE: A wonderful year, or 10 months or so, although it didn't turn out to be as quiet as I'd thought it would be.

Q: How so?

NEITZKE: The various congressional investigations of the Iranian "green light" decision got cranked up in the spring of 1996, so I was involved in that.

Q: Well now, when you were called up for that, you were on leave without pay and all of a sudden you are heading up to testify before Congress. Was anyone at State handling you, advising you, or anything?

NEITZKE: I wasn't looking for advice or handling. These were investigations, hearings, that no one in the Clinton Administration wanted. 1996 was a Presidential election year. The allegation that the Administration had facilitated a major Iranian move into Europe was serious, as was the question whether the Administration had violated statutes dealing with reporting requirements for covert activities. The Administration knew this wasn't going to be pleasant. They were prepared to brand it a partisan witch hunt, but they knew that, even if they did their best to stonewall, there was enough substance to the allegations to make it embarrassing. When I was contacted by State, Congressional Relations, and told I'd have to testify, they assumed I'd want to help defend the Administration. Once it became apparent that that was not necessarily my objective, the atmosphere cooled considerably. I was treated by some at State as though I were just a bit radioactive.

We had a murder board before the first hearing, that of the Senate Intelligence committee. It was in the Ops Center and was quite formal. Lots of people - Peter was there too - seemed concerned by what I might say. I was a little taken aback.

Q: Perhaps you should explain murder board.

NEITZKE: Sort of a moot court. A staged trial run before a panel asking you tough questions, of the sort they'd expect the committee to ask. I think I'd been advised before that point that if I wanted access to any documents, such as Zagreb's reporting when I was there, that could be arranged. More interestingly, they urged me to go out to Langley and examine certain Agency files from the relevant period, particularly those relating to Agency-State friction over the "green light" decision and its aftermath. Doing so would supposedly cure me of any potential allegiance to the Agency's view of things. This was going to be contentious and messy, no question about that. And State wanted to be sure that, among other things, I would support Peter. I recall the first murder board question, whether I thought Peter had ever acted unprofessionally in Zagreb. It was all deadly serious. A quick "no" was expected, but I paused. I may even have laughed. Peter had been young, youngish, and single in Zagreb, and not exactly your average choirboy. But I said no, Peter had been fine, and we got on with it.

Q: Well, what was it exactly that you were being asked to review at the CIA?

NEITZKE: I think they'd held onto every message sent in during this period, reportedly a huge tome of material. They'd kept up a more or less constant line of chatter with Langley. IM type traffic.

Q: Instant Messaging.

NEITZKE: Right. I think this was before we called it that, but that's basically what it was. And this material, if I'd gone out and read through it, would supposedly have convinced me of the Agency's duplicity. And my testifying to this supposedly inappropriate conduct would have vindicated Peter, while damaging or perhaps even ending an Agency career. But I knew that wasn't the real problem. The problem didn't lie within Embassy Zagreb. The problem was that NSC and State, in lying to the DCI and the Pentagon about the "green light," had started an unavoidable cat and mouse game within Embassy Zagreb. And I testified to that effect.

The other thing I recall about the summons to testify - I think someone from one of the committees had contacted me separately - was the presumption by committee staff that I'd be reluctant to appear and might need to be compelled to do so. But that wasn't at all how I felt. I told committee staff I'd be happy to meet with them alone before the hearings, without anyone else from State present, if that would be helpful. I would not be a reluctant witness.

Q: But this kind of thing can be awfully delicate, even dangerous, from a career standpoint, can it not?

NEITZKE: I didn't pay a lot of attention to that. I preferred that all of this come out, the rank amateurism and incompetence that underlay our Bosnia policy for three years and that led to the "green light" decision and its direct effect on our security in Zagreb. I wanted that out. But as time went by, and it became clear that the Administration couldn't easily wiggle out of this, the hearings took on an increasingly partisan cast, with senior Administration witnesses ever more defensive and creative in rationalizing the "green light" decision. As I earlier indicated, by the end, they were, almost to a person, spearheaded by Holbrooke, casting that decision as an almost ingenious move that led directly to Dayton. Circle the wagons. Stand truth on its head. Do whatever you need to do to stay in the game.

Q: Well what do you remember about the hearings themselves?

NEITZKE: The first was a closed hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Specter, whom I'd met out in Zagreb. I had a pre-meeting with him and Senator Kerry in which Specter said, you know, you've been in the Foreign Service 25 years, how could you support something like this, the "green light' decision, what were you thinking? I told him his assumption was wrong, that I'd strongly opposed it from the outset. He was taken aback, having presumed, I guess, that everyone in the Administration would stand behind the decision.

In the formal hearing, I went over in detail what had happened during the "green light" decision itself. I again made clear that I'd opposed both the decision and the stunningly ham handed manner in which we'd been asked to execute it, put nothing in writing, keep the Agency in the dark, and so on. I also noted that I'd done all I could to ameliorate the predictable effects of that decision on embassy operations and on our security situation in Zagreb. Agency lawyers present, together with other former Zagreb personnel, were visibly relieved and thanked me afterward for my testimony.

The House Intelligence Committee's focus was different. It too was a closed hearing. Since it was the House, it was a larger committee, and many more members were present. We covered the basics of the "green light" decision, as I recall, and the rest of it, but they were most interested to hear from me whether I thought Agency personnel had acted inappropriately toward Peter. There came a point in their questioning, in some of the apparent presumptions in their questioning, when I interrupted to ask the Chairman if I might make a statement. I said it sounded as though many of them wondered just what kind of an embassy we were running in Zagreb, as though things had run amok. I said that that was not at all the case, that all involved had acted professionally, that the problem being acted out in Zagreb, to the extent there was one, had been created solely in Washington by the various deliberate deceptions within the highest levels of the Executive Branch. When I finished it was as though everyone - in both parties - heaved a sigh of relief. The tension had evaporated. The Chairman thanked me for what he termed my "wisdom." As I mentioned earlier, Goss asked whether I expected to face retaliation, whether I wanted the protection of the whistleblower act. I said no, and that was about it. The DAS from State Congressional Relations who'd accompanied me to the hearing gave me the full radioactive treatment on the way back to the Department, breaking his silence only once to inquire nervously whether I knew of anything to implicate Secretary Christopher. I told him I didn't.

The longest and most comprehensive inquiry by far was that of a special ad hoc subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee. I think it was informally called the Iranian "green light" subcommittee. It was nominally chaired by Henry Hyde, but the committee itself never held hearings in formal session. It had a large budget and staff, however, along with subpoena power, and took extensive sworn depositions from everyone. Here the partisan angle was most apparent, with Democratic staff often acting essentially as cross examiners, attempting to catch me up, catch me in an inconsistency, or otherwise debunk what I was saying, especially about whether the "green light" decision reflected any real change in policy and whether the consequences of that decision for the security of the American community in Zagreb had been as dire as I portrayed them. On the latter, I was able to cite specific sources, reports, and cables which left no doubt about the state of our security. The Democratic staff's strained effort to portray our security fears as overblown, despite the hard evidence, left me thinking that the only real way to have cut through the partisanship on this would have been to get blown up. Then, perhaps, they'd have listened, maybe.

In the end, the Iranian "green light" subcommittee issued a huge report containing quotes or summaries of key testimony, the most important documents brought to light, and the differing majority and minority conclusions. Actually many of the documents, including the documents I had brought to their attention on the specific threats that the "green light" decision visited on the American community in Zagreb, although included in the report, had been almost entirely blacked out by the Administration because of their sensitivity.

Q: You must have been pleased to have that experience behind you.

NEITZKE: It wouldn't die. As I mentioned earlier, I was later summoned to the Justice Department to be interviewed at length about several individuals whom the committee had referred for consideration of indictment for perjury. Some of the most senior Administration witnesses gave depositions or testimony incompatible with one another, to put it nicely. But, as far as I know, charges were never brought against anyone.

Q: Okay, well, in your year of leave without pay, did you have any contact with the old Belgrade club? I was just wondering, or were the Department people...

NEITZKE: Not Belgrade club, but with former Belgrade hands who were, as usual, dominant in State Balkan policy positions. One of them asked me during my LWOP year, sometime after Dayton, whether I'd like to go out to Sarajevo to serve as chief of staff to the High Representative for Bosnia. OHR was an office created after Dayton to oversee implementation of the civilian aspects of the agreement. It was rumored to be a bureaucratic and management mess. So, would I like to forego the Senior Seminar and head back to the former Yugoslavia for a year or so and help shape up OHR? That was something I truly did not want to do, for family and other reasons. The shortcomings of the Dayton Agreement were becoming pretty apparent. And Bosnia was becoming something of a personnel zoo - a super magnet both for older ex-Yugo, ex-East European State Department hands and for a group of other FSOs who seemed to sense that it was next hot place from which to try to springboard their careers. What a contrast that was from only a year earlier.

Q: Well, let us move on. Can we talk a bit about the Senior Seminar and how that came about? I mean, you were finishing a year of leave without pay. Putting you in the Senior Seminar would not have been expected, would it? I mean Personnel...

NEITZKE: Not ordinarily. But Personnel didn't exactly select me for the Senior Seminar; it was more or less automatic.

Q: How so?

NEITZKE: The year I'd made Senior Foreign Service, 1994, the promotion panel had ranked me number one. I was told that that individual each year, or at their first opportunity, was automatically offered the Senior Seminar. I'd heard great things about it and didn't want to pass up the opportunity.

Q: Well, talk a little about that experience. That was 1996 or 1997?

NEITZKE: 1996 to 1997. As you know, the Senior Seminar is no more. It's been terminated. And I think the handwriting was on the wall when I went through it. It was supposed to bring together a group, about half State and half other agency or military services, of rising stars at the early senior career point, the OC level in State, their counterparts in other agencies, and...

Q: Captains in the Navy, colonels in the...

NEITZKE: Exactly. Colonels and Captains. And senior civil service from CIA, NSA, the Pentagon, and others. You spend nine months intensely studying America from various angles, hot-button issues, social trends, regional perspectives, the problems of industry and labor, the components of national security, and a lot of time getting to know the military up close. It involves travel around the U.S., many stops at military bases, invited speakers of national renown, and various segments devoted to honing management skills. It's an enormously expensive program, measured on a per capita basis. The salaries, administrative support costs, flights, per diem, and so on. But if the Seminar actually functioned as it was supposed to, or at least as I had imagined it was supposed to, you might be able to justify the expense. If you were selecting the very cream of the crop and rigorously preparing them for senior national security roles, graduating them to pre-assigned senior executive positions, in the expectation they'd have 10 or so more years to serve, then arguably it could be justified.

But the reality fell well short of that ideal. The intellectual rigor of the program was not that high. I'm not sure whether that was a function of this particular group or whether most Senior Seminars fit this mold. This was a very diverse group, all sharp, accomplished individuals. But the collective attitude that emerged seemed to be don't rock any boats, let's appreciate this for what it is, we'll learn something, do some interesting travel, have a good time and then go back to work. There were very few challenging debates or sharp exchanges. Our occasional self-critique sessions - how could we make the Seminar better, sharper, more useful - elicited few suggestions. Most seemed content. I'd hoped to get more out of it. I wanted to explore racism, for example, racial stereotyping, racial consciousness. This was supposed to be a frank examination of America, of the cutting edge issues of the day. I wanted to discuss why we seemed to be losing the battle to stem drug flows to the cause of multi-culturalism on our Southwestern border. But there was no appetite for this, almost antipathy to doing so in any serious way. There was no shortage of time for various forms of sensitivity training, however, which reached truly ridiculous proportions at several points.

Q: Well, you know, I was in the 17th Senior Seminar, this is '74-'75, and much of what you have described I also found. I was in a sense a diversity selection myself because I was the consular officer. This is when consular officers were deemed to be, well, not quite first class citizens. One thing I noted, however, was that the military, the men we got from the military, they were fine people but none of them made flag rank.

NEITZKE: I'm not sure what happened to those in my class.

Q: When I was in Personnel we used to have what we called training officers. These were officers who, even coming from a busy bureau, were always available for training courses. And some in my Senior Seminar were these sort of officers, nice people but they were not going anywhere. And there were some strong, up and coming officers who were placed in the group mostly to get them out of the way for one reason or another. Tom Boyatt, for example, was put there to get him away from Henry Kissinger, I think, because Tom had crossed Kissinger over Cyprus as a desk officer. So even back then, there were many reasons why people ended up in the Senior Seminar. I felt that it was squandering our riches. And of course when I came out of the Seminar I went over to Personnel and they said, well, what are we going to do with you now?

NEITZKE: Having just invested a large amount of money in you.

Q: Oh yes.

NEITZKE: You'd think there would have been some advance planning, some accountability. Any organization with a bottom line would have been compelled to justify that expense and to make the most of your experience. But, of course, State has no real bottom line. So no one's actually in charge of seeing to it that Senior Seminar graduates move on to jobs that can justify the investment. Who gets what is still a jealously guarded prerogative of the bureaus, especially the regional bureaus. Contacts, bureau reputation, and the amount of time you're willing to invest networking and selling yourself, are what matter most in assignments at the senior level. Defenders of the system would argue, of course, that when a person gets to a certain level, is even considered for the Senior Seminar, they know how the system works and should have few problems working it. But that's not always the case.

Q: Was not the case with you...

NEITZKE: No. But my situation was different. Coming out of the Seminar, I didn't actually want to work on substantive policy, and I didn't go looking for that kind of job. I was just making the point that this is one of the reasons the Senior Seminar was terminated, that its immense cost bore little relationship to the future contributions of many of the participants.

Q: You said you grew frustrated. How did you work that out? I mean it is very much a group dynamic.

NEITZKE: I tried where I could I to make it a little more like a real seminar. There's something called member presentations, for example, in which a participant leads an hour or so discussion on an area on his or her expertise. I did mine on Bosnia, set up the room in an actual seminar, more confrontational, format, showed some video, gave a presentation, and led a discussion. With a little provocation, it turned into the most spirited debate of the whole nine months and had to be halted after the second of two two-hour sessions. Not everyone liked that, but I wish we'd done more of it. There was also a recurring debate of sorts on the essence of leadership. Some, including FSI staff, more or less equated leadership with management. I strongly argued otherwise, that management is a learnable skill, whereas leadership is more a measure of character and risk taking, often with a moral dimension, that true leadership is fairly rare, especially among career government employees.

Q: Where did you spend your off-site month. They still did that I presume.

NEITZKE: I spent that month at the Holocaust Memorial Museum downtown. I chaired a seminar on the Cambodian genocide. But mainly I researched and wrote the long paper that I referred to earlier, "But Bosnia was not the Holocaust!" It looked at how the State Department had investigated and reacted to both the Holocaust and Bosnia in two parts, what did we know and when did we know it, and then what did we do about it. There were remarkable parallels, not in the dimensions of the two, of course, but in the manner in which we tried to avert our eyes to both and in the range of reactions by responsible officials to each catastrophe. I concluded, as my title implies, that Bosnia was not by any stretch another Holocaust, but that there were echoes of the Holocaust all over Bosnia, especially in our pathetic failure to measure up to either challenge.

Q: You know, we have been talking for some time now and I can see, to put it mildly, where you do not always agree with the powers that be. You are not exactly a company man, Ron.

NEITZKE: I never felt that this particular company, as you put it, ought to belong solely to the company men. I remember what a secretary of mine once said on this, though. It was in London, in the Political Section, and this secretary had known me in a much earlier incarnation. We were all gathered in the outer office, having a toast to something or other, very jovial atmosphere, and my boss made some comment about my time in the Service. That's when this secretary spoke up and said, well, the thing you have to know about Ron is that he never really joined the Service. Laughs all around. It was cute, but it wasn't accurate. I did join, but I didn't always feel like a full member of the club. And it is a club, much more a club than a company.

It's interesting, this notion of the company man, or organization man, as it was called way back when. If you asked the average FSO today whether he or she thinks today's Foreign Service bears any likeness at all to the that of, say, the 1950s or early 1960s, the answer would surely be no, it's so changed, so liberated, so much more diverse. But I wonder. From what I've seen, the cautious, careerist impulse is alive and well. Where's the intellectual diversity in all of this, or the political diversity for that matter, the outspokenness, the willingness to stand apart? Look at what the Service's dissent awards are now handed out for; it rarely has much to do with real dissent.

I remember one session in the Senior Seminar in which the current A100 class was brought up to have lunch with us. Then someone suggested that each member of the Seminar share a piece of advice with the newcomers. A little strange, but why not? When it finally came my turn, I stood up and said, you know, many of you guys are going to spend 25or 30 years in this place. Your core values, even your integrity, may be challenged. When that happens, don't be afraid to stand up, to speak out, to push back. A silence fell on the room. They stared at me as though I'd just spoken in Serbo-Croatian, and none of them knew the language. It was as though this whole dimension of professional life hadn't occurred to them. They'd fought so hard to get there, they were so happy to be in the door, why would anyone want to risk exclusion?

I guess some enjoy challenging the status quo more than others. Others say it's mostly tilting at windmills.

Q: It depends on your situation.

NEITZKE: Or how many windmills you encounter.

Q: Yes. And then there are real, honest to God dragons, not just windmills, as you found in Croatia, you know, and other places.

NEITZKE: Yes.

Q: Alright, well, is there anything else you took away from the Senior Seminar?

NEITZKE: The memories. Watching the Inuits land a whale off Barrow, Alaska, for example. Asking Justice Scalia how he kept going, always swimming against the tide. Lying on my stomach in the belly of an Air Force tanker at umpteen thousand feet, my nose virtually on the boom, as other aircraft approach to get refueled. Questioning Larry Summers on his blanket opposition to linking trade with human rights. Operating the tank warfare simulators at Fort Knox. Firing some very big guns at dummy tanks a mile away at Camp Pendleton. Experiencing J. Carter Brown's linking of classical music with great works of art. Joking around with Phyllis Schlafly. Pressing the chief spokesman for the National Rifle Association to reveal his worst fear. Meeting in New York with Rudy Giuliani on his successful efforts to reduce crime. Patrolling south central Los Angeles in a police squad car after midnight. Touring prisons, auto assembly plants, and railroad switching yards. Asking the Chairman of the New York Stock Exchange how he'd react to a market meltdown. And on and on. It was an amazing experience.

Q: I agree. Well, now we are in 1997. Where to next?

NEITZKE: I had decided that, following the Seminar, I'd prefer not to work on substantive, regional policy, let alone on the Balkans. There was an opening in Senior Assignments and I went for that, and it proved to be every bit as interesting as I'd thought it would be.

Q: Is there a training program of any sort for those jobs. I mean, they are very different from what, from anything you had done before.

NEITZKE. There was no training. But I did serve on a mid-level promotion panel between the Senior Seminar and the Personnel job. Lots of insights gained there proved useful in Personnel. Until you serve on a promotion panel you can't fully comprehend how overwritten most reports are or how averse most rating officers are to including anything significant of a negative nature. Despite the system's efforts to ensure fairness, two different panels looking at the same several hundred candidates for promotion could come up with significantly different rank orderings. The stars would be promoted in either case, and the weakest officers would still be low ranked, but in rank ordering the vast grey area of officers in between, there's a lot of room for subliminal bias and other factors to affect one's judgment, bias drawn from each panel member's very different experiences in the Service. They try to balance that out in putting together the panels. And I'm not sure I know a better way to go about it. In any event, I had that background to rely on, as well as the sum total of my experience in the Service to that point.

Q: Well, let us talk about specifically what the job entailed.

NEITZKE: First and foremost, just an enormous amount of work. Most of it's aimed at promoting openness and fairness - making sure officers comply with the complex rules governing bidding, making sure bids are accurately logged in, liaising with the bureaus, and dealing with the flood of contacts with your clients, providing advice, updates and so forth.

I was one of five senior counseling and assignments officers, but either by fluke or oversight I ended up with responsibility for about a third of all FSO-1s and seniors. I had about 350 clients of whom 200 or so were up for assignment in the 1996-1997 cycle.

The job is to enforce the rules while shepherding your clients through the assignments cycle. Of course, not everyone wants or needs shepherding . Some officers require handholding on an almost daily basis. At the other end of the spectrum are those, mainly far more successful officers, who doubt that anyone in Personnel can tell them anything they don't already know. By the time you reach the senior level, you've been butting heads with the personnel system every two or three years for a very long time. You have your own fix on how well you've been treated and on how equitable the system is. People have become jaded about these things to one extent or another. It's not like dealing with wide-eyed JOs headed out to...

Q: Junior officers.

NEITZKE: Junior officers going out to the kinds of more or less predictable first and second tours that we all had. You're dealing with people whose lives have become more complex; they're older, more likely to be married and have spousal concerns, have children and health or education concerns. And sometimes even more importantly, they have corridor reputations that may not jibe with their glowing personnel files. And some have reached a point in their careers where, to put it nicely, their firmly held career aspirations don't match their demonstrated capabilities. You also have people who've been in Washington way too long, who've all but forgotten the "foreign" in Foreign Service and who need to be pushed either overseas or out. So that's the general profile at the O-1/senior level.

New 0-1s tend to be obsessively concerned about whether or when to open their so-called senior threshold window. There are always a handful of emergency cases as well, critical health or evacuation issues, officers an Ambassador can't abide any longer, possible malfeasance, or the odd officer who just can't handle the responsibilities, typically post management, of the job they've been assigned to. It's an interesting mix, more or less a constant torrent coming at you. You never feel you're really done for the day.

Q: Well, when you came there then they were basically telling you to use your judgment rather than to follow a checklist of dos and don'ts.

NEITZKE: There are rules governing a lot of things, but there's also a lot of personal judgment involved. They take some care in choosing officers for these jobs; they're clearly not for everyone. Basic smarts, career savvy, and interpersonal skills are probably most important. Are you the kind of person whom your colleagues would want to bring their troubles and concerns to, someone able not only to provide answers to technical questions but to offer useful career advice as well. As I said, you're dealing with more mature, often pricklier personalities at the senior level, and with those who may doubt you have much useful to tell them in any event. It's a challenge to earn the respect of that particular group. Then, too, many of these guys are your peers. You may have competed against some of them for jobs in the past. Many are hoping for missions, for ambassadorships, and while most people know or think they know how that special game is played, others come looking to you for basic strategy on the politicking involved, or insights as to where the real power lies within the system for a particular job. In that regard, even senior officers, including some of the best in the Service, were grateful for tidbits of info.

Q: Okay, you are sitting in your office and Stuart Kennedy comes in and says hi, Mr. Neitzke, I would like to be ambassador to Albania. What would you tell me?

NEITZKE: Well, Stu, for you I'd say just sign right here, these are your orders and godspeed. But if you were anyone else, I'd try to have reviewed your file before you came in. I'd want to hear what you felt your credentials were, whom you knew in the EUR front office and on the 7th floor and at the NSC, and just how well you knew them, how sure you were that they'd support you when the time came. Ideally, I'd already have some idea of what the competition looked like for Tirana, whether it was a job potentially open to a political appointee, not likely in the case of Tirana. But I'd ask you what you knew about others interested in the job and the support they might be able to line up. I'd form a preliminary judgment about whether you had a fighting chance, whether someone else would try to get you on the short list or whether we in Personnel would have to consider doing that. Or, if I were already pretty sure you had little or no chance of getting the job, I'd probably tell you up front that it looked tough and that you might want to consider other options.

For all but a very few FSOs, even among the very ablest officers, getting a mission is a long, dauntingly difficult process; fraught with uncertainty virtually until you've been confirmed. It's not a fair competition, open equally to all contenders. It's easy enough to learn when a mission will be turning over, the Ambassador is scheduled for replacement, but by then several candidates may have been eying it for some time. And there is a group of officers who, by virtue of their service at the NSC, or in a bureau front office, or for a senior Under Secretary, or some other powerful person, will have the inside track on, if not a specific ambassadorship, then at least a mission somewhere. Potential ambassadorships get derailed for that reason all the time; someone who needs to be taken care of got bumped from somewhere else and their fallback is the mission you thought you had in hand. And all kinds of diversity factors also come into play. What's going on in Albania, or wherever you're looking, also maters. If it's a quiet backwater and likely to remain so, then it might as easily go to someone with no area experience who needs to be taken care of. On the other hand, if it's a mission in a tense, vitally important, frontline area, those most highly thought of, who know the area, have the language, and have senior-level policy experience with the area will have the inside track.

Q: Well, sitting where you were sitting in Personnel, how much were you likely to know about all the maneuvering and lobbying taking place with the Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries?

NEITZKE: It would have been hit or miss, even if one had access to all the information, gossip, rumors, and so forth available in Personnel. There was a lot going on, support being promised, deals being cut, that none of us heard of until various positions, including ambassadorships, had essentially been locked up. And just to be clear, even within Personnel, if that's whose support you were seeking in your run for a mission, and most did this at least on a pro forma basis, you'd also have contacted the head of senior assignments or the head of the whole assignments office, as well as the Director General. Personnel staffed the D Committee, the committee chaired by the Deputy Secretary that considered and signed off on State's list of recommended candidates for upcoming ambassadorial vacancies.

Timing is obviously critical. Your chances depend in part on what's coming open in the timeframe in which you have to maneuver. You might find yourself at that prime point in your career, ready for a mission, when there are very few openings and none in the missions for which you'd be most competitive. On the other hand, however uniquely qualified you might think you are for a particular mission, there might be another candidate who knows little or nothing about that country but nonetheless needs to be taken care of in a year when there are very few openings. Or other factors might intervene at the last minute to block you.

Q: It sounds capricious.

NEITZKE: It's politics, and lots of other things. Once, for example, we'd gone through a rigorous process of screening all the candidates, the D Committee had held its discussions and made its selections, and the list of some 20 or so proposed ambassadorships, all FSOs, was sent to Secretary Albright for what we assumed would be quick approval. But she, or rather her chief of staff, Elaine Shocas, angrily rejected the list, demanding that it include many more females. There had been no overt anti-female bias in compiling the list; indeed, my boss was prone to boast that her primary responsibility was to "look out for the ladies." So in the aftermath of the list's rejection, some long and distinguished Foreign Service Careers came to an abrupt end just short of the ambassadorial ring. And my colleagues and I began contacting typically surprised female FSOs to inform them that they were being considered for this or that ambassadorship. In a couple cases, they were even allowed to choose which of several missions they'd most like to have. In time a new list was cobbled together with more females, run through the D Committee, approved and moved on to the White House. You don't get much more capricious than what I witnessed in that instance.

But here's the thing about the struggle for ambassadorships. It's almost like dealing with Type A parents who'll do anything, I mean literally anything, to get their kid into an elite prep school or university, as though that acceptance alone would bestow a kind of god-given seal of approval for all time. That's how some regarded the ambassadorial title. I'd have clients come in, good officers who'd been kicked around a bit by the system, hadn't landed that mission yet. They'd complain about how unfair, arbitrary and so forth it all was, how so and so had, through a rigged deal, gotten this or that post for which they were laughably unqualified, or so they would claim. You'd think that that kind of cynicism might tarnish the brand a bit; if becoming an ambassador were all that haphazard a deal, then how much honor could the title actually bestow in the end. But in the very next breath these same cynics would plead for another shot at it, as though, if they personally achieved it, it would be the result of a rational process, fully deserved, and universally recognized as such. For some it was as though everything they'd done in their entire life to that point, in their entire career, paled in comparison to landing the coveted title of U.S. Ambassador to anywhere. The title was beyond an obsession. When it finally dawned on some that this final glory was going to elude them, they took it very, very hard. One client of mine even threatened, shouted actually, I'm not kidding, that he'd "go postal" in the Department if he didn't get a mission. Ironically, in retirement he went to the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Q: Well okay, the ambassadorships are what people focus on, but how about deputy chief of mission or counselor of embassy jobs? Did you find that you had to almost recruit for some of those jobs or were they always oversubscribed or...

NEITZKE: I don't recall problems filling DCMships. If it were a large post, it would be essentially the Ambassador's pick, within reason. And for smaller posts there were always plenty of bidders. DCMships were seen by most as a serious step up the ladder. Even smaller DCMships were sometimes seen as outweighing Counselor positions in much larger missions. A Personnel-level committee decided on smaller DCMships and principal officer positions. With regard to having to recruit for any of these positions, that was sometimes the case with counselor positions, but maybe not for the reason you'd suspect. Aggressive younger officers were always trying to stretch up to these jobs. An OC counselor job, a section chief job, even in a large embassy, might not be seen as promotable for an OC, who had only 7 years to get to MC. So often you'd have active bidding by talented lower ranking officers for the stretch assignment. Or a regional front office would try to hold an OC job for a favored 0-1 or even 0-2 officer. Then you'd have to try to recruit seniors to compete against them, which was not always easy, and it wasn't a sure thing that you'd trump the not-at-grade front office candidate.

A type of forced recruitment was sometimes necessary for the needs of the Service, to staff hard to fill jobs in difficult embassies, but not as much of this occurred at the senior level.

Q: FSO-1 marks a turning point for many officers. Will they make the Senior Foreign Service? Should they try? I would just imagine that required some counseling.

NEITZKE: As neuralgic as the issue of an ambassadorial title became for many seniors, getting over the threshold from O-1 to OC was even more so for mid-level officers. In contrast to some of the seniors, most of the O-1s would readily seek our advice, usually on whether or when to open their windows.

Q: Would you explain what the window is?

NEITZKE: Opening one's window is the decision by an FSO-1 to compete for promotion into the Senior Foreign Service. The window stays open for six promotion cycles, six years. If you've not been promoted to OC in six years, you have to leave the service, usually via a seventh year grace period. But, in nearly all such cases, you'd be immediately eligible for an annuity. On the other hand, you don't ever have to open your window. You can retire as an O-1, after a combined time in class of twenty-some years, I believe it is. Most officers are in their late 30s or early 40s when they face this decision, not a time in one's life when you want to risk finding yourself out and jobless in six years. So a certain amount of trepidation typically accompanies the decision of when to open that window. Many in the first cohort of officers to open their windows after this threshold was introduced in the late 1980s got burned, because they could not, and one still cannot, be sure how many OC promotion numbers will be available in a given year or period of years. If promotion numbers dry up, or you find yourself in non-competitive jobs after opening your window, you could be out of luck, however talented an officer you might be.

Q: I might point out to the reader that an 0-1 is at the level of a full colonel.

NEITZKE: Well, I tried not to overdo that comparison. Our services are very different. But from a protocol standpoint, that's correct. And an OC is a one-star equivalent. So a lot of 0-1s seek the advice of their counseling and assignment officer not just regarding the timing of opening their window but on whether this or that job is promotable. They feel tremendous pressure to get this right. You help them weigh the pros and cons, but you can't provide them the assurance they're looking for. So that occupied a fair amount of my time.

The whole idea of a senior threshold became the subject of a policy debate during my year in Personnel. Some wanted to do away with the six-year window altogether, replacing it with a system of slower, more predictable promotions ensuring a longer, more secure career. Others, including all of my strongest clients, the most talented O-1s in the Service, strongly objected to any change; they wanted an aggressive up or out promotion system. I remember a large, contentious meeting on this issue chaired by the senior DAS in Personnel and involving representatives of nearly all the stakeholders. It included a delegation from USIA, which was then facing the prospect of a forced merger with State and was afraid that its IOs would fare poorly competing for promotions with their State counterparts. At that point the DG, Skip Gnehm, and his deputies were openly sympathetic to the arguments for terminating the window, for providing what they termed more orderly, predictable flow-through.

This really offended me, everything that I felt about the Foreign Service. I wanted officers to take more risks with their careers, not fewer. So I led the charge against terminating the threshold, the window. Well, not a charge, actually, since I was the only one to speak out strongly against it. But I could do so with the authority of representing a third of the FSO-1s and Seniors in the Service. I took to task the whole idea that we'd be better served by a less competitive system, by a mindset even more focused on job and career security. I more or less heaped scorn on the idea, adding that many of my strongest, most competitive clients would rather leave the Service than be held back for years from advancement by an arbitrary, lowest-common-denominator, pay-your-endless-dues-at-every-grade system. We weren't the Teamsters. We weren't the Postal Union. We and our nation benefited from a dynamic, competitive, up-or-out system. As I recall, my intervention more or less brought discussion of this topic to a halt. The senior Personnel DAS was not happy. But in the end the DG decided not to change the system. And I understand that USIA officers fared rather well after the merger.

Q: Well there is the practical side of this. What do you do with all the 01s who had opened their windows?

NEITZKE: There were lots of practical problems with it. You'd back up everything. Everyone would spend extra time in each grade. People were already chafing at the long periods between promotions. Mandated longer minimal times in each grade would erode motivation across the board. And you could kiss goodbye what little taste for risk-taking remained in the Service. On the other hand, people would say, well, to hell with your so-called "best and brightest," they weren't better, they were just luckier or had connections, or whatever, they rose too quickly anyway. Let them cool their heels a bit. We really are a Service of equals. But in fact, as I would argue, we are not. When you get to that level and you're comparing performance files, everybody has a long history. Maybe luck, diversity, or something else did play a role in getting this or that choice assignment, but you just cannot say that we're all equal. So do you hold back the ablest in the Service in the interest of greater job security for the less able? Such a change not only was unwise, it wouldn't make that many people happier. You might even face a rebellion of sorts from the middle ranks.

Q: I was part of a group called The Young Turks during the 1970s. It was led by people like Tom Boyatt and others who were mid-grade, very bright political officers who wanted to get rid of the deadwood at the top so they could get promoted. Of course, once these mid-grade officers got promoted, they no longer saw it that way, the deadwood at the top.

NEITZKE: The anxiety felt by the some FSO-1s, those who wanted the threshold and window terminated, wasn't caused primarily by anger over deadwood at the top. The "new" senior time in class limits had already been in place for quite a while. There was flow through at the top. Not as much as the mid-grade officers would like, they always want to move up faster, but senior deadwood was not the problem. It was anxiety among officers in their 40s, mainly, who had to balance the Service competitiveness that might earlier have appeared attractive to them against a now greater desire for job security. And there was a sense among some who had not been promoted as rapidly as others that the system was inherently unfair. They argued that greater security from long term career predictability was worth the cost of a somewhat slower promotion system for all. As I said, I strongly opposed that position and in the end it was not adopted.

Q: Well so much of this argument seems to be almost beside the point of what the Department is really all about. Management skill is the mantra now, but what we really are is people who know the regions of Yugoslavia or who speak Cantonese or are consular experts. It seems that this expertise almost gets lost in the debate, that much of this is divorced from reality.

NEITZKE: Let me tell you what happened at the first panel I attended. On my...

Q: Panel?

NEITZKE: Panel is where all the assignments officers and a few others come together, usually once a week, to consider, debate, and vote on a long list of proposed assignments. What I saw at that first panel was activity, I thought, completely divorced from reality. Zagreb had been a fairly high threat place, given the terrorist threat, the Serbian rocket attacks and so on. We'd had to push the Department constantly for additional security resources. So I was attuned to the mindset of management at a post in a high threat area.

At my first panel, we considered the request of a friend of mine, a DCM at just such a post, a large, high-threat, class one mission. He was asking for an exception to a personnel regulation that would allow him to hang on a bit longer to a post security officer in whom he had great confidence. To me this was a no-brainer. It was not that big an exception. You give him what he needs. He's responsible for the safety of his people. But the panel, some of whom had never run much of anything, let alone in a high threat post, effectively donned green eyeshades, pulled out their rule books, turned to page 55, sub-paragraph 3c, or whatever, decided that this couldn't be allowed and voted to deny his request. I wanted to strangle them. I asked whether they fully understood what they had just done, its potential consequences. It was pretty clear that for many of them this was mainly a paper exercise; it wasn't about real life, real threats. It was about applying the regulations. I vented to the office director who had chaired the panel, and although sympathetic, he did nothing to change the result. So that was part of my introduction to work in Personnel.

Now the counter argument is that the regulations exist and must be upheld to ensure fairness for all. But as I waded through that year in Personnel, it became ever clearer that while the appearance of fairness was paramount, actual fairness was more often an early casualty of the intense political gamesmanship that governed assignments at the O-1 and senior level. You mentioned that management skill had become the mantra. That's true. If you didn't move smartly up the ladder to increasingly responsible supervisory jobs, you were probably going to be in trouble. So the competition for supervisory jobs, as opposed to, say, advanced area and language training slots - which you don't have time for with your TIC ebbing away, is intense. I felt for these guys and I fought hard to get my clients as fair a shake as possible. And I won lots of tough shootouts, so many, in fact, that I routinely had Ambassadors and Assistant Secretaries appealing to the DG to overturn panel decisions that I'd won.

Q: Explain a shootout.

NEITZKE: A shootout takes place when you have more than one qualified candidate competing for a job. Each assignments officer argues his respective client's case before the larger panel, who can ask questions, and then a vote is taken. Some bureaus, particularly EUR - it was often the EUR assignments that were the most passionately fought out at panel - tried hard to keep things from getting to the point a shootout. They expected their candidates - and EUR, again, would have a chosen candidate for nearly every job - to have a virtual cakewalk at panel. They saw the panel as a formalizing cipher for assignment decisions properly made by the bureaus. Shootouts could be unpredictable and thus were to be avoided if possible. Especially in the case of upper level assignments, EUR and other bureaus as well would seek to dissuade - gently strong arm, subtly intimidate, but in some cases threaten with never working again in that bureau - any officer opting to exercise his or her right to compete against their chosen candidates. I counseled quite a few of my clients to take on the bureaus' candidates, despite the intimidation, and I won most of the subsequent shootouts, which tended to send some bureau Executive Directors - in whose power domain the management of these assignment lay - into a rage. One of them, I recall, a buddy of the DG's, once ran to see the DG after I'd won a hard-fought shootout to complain that I was wrecking the system, arguing, or so it was reported to me, that Neitzke didn't belong in Personnel, the panel was being swayed by me to make bad decisions. They would write lengthy appeals to the DG, asking that supposedly egregious panel decision be overturned. To his credit, Gnehm, at least for the first half year or so, upheld every decision we made.

Q: Well it sounds as though you took to this part of the job, taking on the bureaus and such.

NEITZKE: I didn't shrink from it, no. But I didn't always go looking for trouble. One reason I had so many controversial cases is the disproportionately large number of clients I had up for reassignment that year. I had lots of clients who were at do-or-die points in their careers and decided to take on the system, the bureau candidates, and I rarely did anything to discourage them. And we won most of these cases.

As time went on, however, Gnehm began sympathizing more and more with the bureaus; he didn't like getting all those reclamas of our decisions. The way I saw it, the bureaus were already getting 90-some percent of what they wanted. Unless the panel, all of Personnel was indeed nothing more than a cipher, we had to stand up to them. 90-some percent wasn't enough for them, however; the bureaus wanted it all. To that end, they persuaded Gnehm to restructure the panel, inserting in place of assignments officers, including senior assignments officers, bureau-chosen factotums in sufficient number to determine virtually every outcome to the bureaus' satisfaction. And that's when I decided to leave, at the end of one year.

Q: The bureaus wanted absolute power.

NEITZKE: That's what it was about. Part of the criticism leveled against Personnel through the years was that it was nothing but a rubber stamp for a bureau-controlled process. I tried to do what I could to make it just a little freer and fairer and open. I wasn't out to wreck the system; I just wanted to give a few officers a break, a shot at the ring, good officers, competitive officers, but officers who perhaps had not spent as much of their careers currying favor with the bureaus. But the bureaus very jealously guarded their prerogatives, their power. And Gnehm ultimately acceded to their demands. I didn't want to be part of the orchestrated charade that thereafter passed for a panel so I asked to be transferred.

Q: Well again, I come back to my question, was anybody minding the store, seeing to it that we sent out to the most important positions people who had the area, and language and other skills needed for the job, the best people available? Or was this more like just a game?

NEITZKE: Sure it's a game, and a very serious one. People's lives and careers are on the line, our nation's interests are on the line. It's rare, even at the ambassadorial level, and certainly at lower levels, that we identify and send out the very best officer for a given job. It just doesn't work that way. It probably can't. It depends on who's available when a job is opening up. There may be several officers, all strong in slightly different ways, but each of whom would bring a lot to the job and could do it well. There may not be a single best officer, although I'd be prepared to argue that there is more often than not at the ambassadorial level, but that is the most political of levels. My problem was with the numerous extraneous factors that got introduced into the process, the rank cronyism, the payoffs, the inside deals, the occasional intimidation, the arbitrariness of the process.

The bureaus would argue that they knew better than anyone whom they need; they knew best the demands of a given post or position. They had to run the missions, they had to do the work, they had no interest in putting mediocre officers into important jobs. And generally that argument was valid. But often they were just playing favorites, placing strong officers but not always the most qualified of those available.

There was another aspect to this that I found equally troubling. I alluded to it in the RSO example I cited. In certain parts of the world where we clearly had vital security interests, it was often difficult to get officers to bid on senior jobs at grade. For example, in the spring of 1998, Pakistan and India were engaged in a nuclear arms race, testing nuclear devices and missiles. Yet there were counselor jobs on the subcontinent on which we couldn't get even one senior to bid. The bureaus had identified stretch candidates, solid lower-ranking officers, but these jobs, if any, called for our best at-grade, language-qualified talent. The jobs I guess weren't deemed sufficiently managerial to be promotable, and this wasn't the kind of situation where the DG would even consider using his directed assignment authority.

Q: His power to send anyone anywhere based on Service needs.

NEITZKE: Yes. Most jobs were in fact filled by very qualified officers. It's just that there were too many times when you could see that the right thing wasn't being done, that critical jobs weren't getting the best available talent. And that was frustrating.

Q: Well it sounds as though you made very few friends in EUR, by your work in Personnel. Did you feel that you will never breakfast in Europe again?

NEITZKE: Well put. I wasn't out to win that particular popularity contest, no. But this was another obstacle in trying to get panel members to stand up to the bureaus. All of them were on two-year assignments to Personnel and a fair number hoped for an onward assignment in EUR or whatever other bureau we might be contending with in a given case. So they were most reluctant to alienate the interested bureau lest they themselves be blackballed when they went hunting for a job in that bureau. Panel debates and voting were supposed to be held in confidence, but very little went unnoticed or unreported.

As for breakfast in Europe again, I knew I would, but perhaps not on the company's dime. After what I'd experienced in Zagreb, and witnessed in that year in Personnel, the spell had been pretty thoroughly broken.

Q: So where did you go?

NEITZKE: I searched around for something interesting to do for seven or eight months and found it in one of the unlikeliest of places, the Historian's office. I hadn't...

Q: Why only eight or nine months? How old were you?

NEITZKE: Not yet 50, so I needed another short assignment. For part of that time, I served on USIA's Senior Threshold promotion panel over at their old building. In any event, I hadn't crossed paths with the Historian's office since we'd worked closely together on the post-Shah Iran project almost twenty years earlier. I spoke with Bill Slany, the Department Historian, who had an interesting proposal: find the Ustashe gold, or rather, take a deeper, more critical look at the USG's avowed suspicion that a large horde of Ustashe-looted gold had ended up in the Vatican as World War II was drawing to a close.

Undersecretary Stu Eisenstadt had led a government-wide effort a year or so earlier aimed at unearthing all documents in U.S. Government possession bearing on the question of Nazi-looted victim gold and other assets. Survivors among the population from whom these assets had been looted were dying off and if any justice were to be done the government would need to move rapidly. There had been a number of piecemeal settlements, national settlements with victim groups, insurance company settlements and so forth, but this was to be an all out effort to disclose all relevant information still in USG files and to encourage other governments, including the Vatican, to do likewise. A separate section of the Eisenstadt report, based on a quick and dirty collection of seemingly relevant documents, dealt with the uncertain fate of the Ustashe gold. It implied not only that a massive amount of gold had been moved out of Croatia by the Ustashe, Croatia's wartime Nazi-allied fascist regime, but that much of that gold had found its way to the Vatican. The further implication, though muted, was that this Vatican-held or protected Ustashe gold may have been used to fund the infamous so-called rat line by which ex-Nazi and Ustashe mass murderers had been smuggled out of Europe to South America.

This fairly incendiary implication was, I think, deliberately planted by Eisenstadt in hopes of smoking out the Vatican, getting them to open up their wartime archives for Western inspection. All of these implications, however, arose mainly from a document called the Bigelow Memorandum, dated 1946. Slany asked me to look into this whole issue, especially the Bigelow Memorandum - I think he suspected that Eisenstadt was on pretty thin ice - and try to determine what happened to the Ustashe gold. Why me? Because I knew some Croatian history, could speak and read Croatian, and at least for a short time, I was available. So I agreed to take this on.

While not exactly of white hot policy relevance, this subject and the Eisenstadt report had found their way into a couple news stories. The exact fate of the Ustashe gold had stumped scholars and other investigators for a long time. The subject abounded in conspiracy theories, in a number of which the Vatican loomed large. A book called Unholy Trinity, for example, alleged that the Vatican was implicated in the disappearance of vast amounts of gold and that if the Vatican's archives could somehow be pried open we would finally know the truth. There was also a widespread belief that some of this gold had found its way into British army hands en route to Italy, a claim that the British Government said it could find no information to substantiate or refute.

Before I'd gotten very far into this, a journalist for Newsweek told me of a book that had been recently published in Croatian purporting to account for the vast majority of the gold in the hands of the Ustashe regime. It was by a Croatian-American professor, Jere Jareb, who'd taught at a small college in Pennsylvania. As a young man, this guy had actually fled Zagreb in May 1945 along with the departing Ustashe regime and their supposed horde of gold. He'd made the subject his lifelong study. A skeptic might argue that this was hardly a reliable source, given his background, and that was the attitude with which I approached his work. I basically translated his book, interviewed him at length in his home, checked all of his claims that I could against everything else I could find, including fresh documents I found in the National Archives out in Maryland, and concluded that the facts appeared to be on his side. He had the better case, his work showed academic care and meticulousness. He didn't claim more than his documents allowed and was careful to point out the many unresolved issues. His recounting of the flight, a massive convoy, out of Zagreb, with allied forces closing in on them, was fascinating.

I was able to account for nearly all of the gold, at least based on the best documentary evidence available. And I was able to show that the Bigelow Memorandum, on which Eisenstadt has based his implication of Vatican perfidy, was a one-off piece, clearly inaccurate as to the amount of gold potentially involved and where it ended up. Bigelow, it turned out was basically a paper mover, distributing unvetted field reports, of which this was one. It stated that the Ustashe had controlled what would have been a preposterous amount of gold, up to 40 times as much as they ever actually had. The claim that much of this gold had made its way into the Vatican was essentially baseless. There was an infamous individual, a Croatian Franciscan named Father Dragonovich, living in Rome after the war in a religious house of some sort. It appears he briefly had in his possession a very small amount of Ustashe gold, and, before it was taken from him by an ex-Ustashe colonel, he may well have used some of this in support of the rat line which was helping ex-Nazis and ex-Ustashe to escape to South America. But the amount of gold involved would have been tiny, and there was no evidence that Dragonovich worked for or in collusion with the Vatican or that any of this gold was ever in the Vatican.

I turned in a long, detailed report of my findings, and sent it around to various interested parties, noting that it contained my conclusions alone. I received a nice note back from the British Foreign Office, acknowledging my exoneration of the British; I'd found that they'd only briefly held a tiny portion of the gold before surrendering it. I don't know whether Eisenstadt ever read it or how he might have reacted.

One interesting by-product of my research was its contribution to an interesting crime novel, a story spun around the fate of the Ustashe gold and some of the characters involved in that.

Q: Called what, the title?

NEITZKE: The Small Boat of Great Sorrows, by Dan Fesperman, a journalist who'd written at least one other Balkan crime thriller, set in Sarajevo amid the war.

Q: Well did you feel pressure at all from the Catholic Church, I mean, this is dirty linen and all?

NEITZKE: No, I had no contact with the Vatican. Most of the approaches to the Vatican on this had taken place before I appeared on the scene. It's clear, however, that this issue had become bound up with several others, including Cardinal Stepinac's posture vis-a-vis the Ustashe authorities and the highly neuralgic question of Pius XII's attitude toward the Nazis and the Holocaust. I think the Vatican had its defenses up. I'm not sure that hastily drawn allegations of their having played host to the Ustashe gold was the smartest way to get them to open up. But it was an interesting final assignment. I enjoyed it.

Q: Well then you retired when?

NEITZKE: I left in early 1999.

Q: Do you get back much?

NEITZKE: Only a few times. Once for an 8th floor dinner celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Foreign Service, which an aged George Kennan attended. It was interesting to lay eyes on the guy whose autobiography had first attracted me to the Service. Yet strangely, on the eve of this dinner he'd given an interview in which he all but discouraged young men and women from joining the Service. I think his point was that, while there was still no other way of life quite like the Foreign Service, it wasn't the way to go if you were mainly interested in influencing policy. And I came back once to have lunch with my wife in the State Department cafeteria at the table where we'd met 25 years earlier to the day.

Q: What have you been doing since leaving the Service?

NEITZKE: Algebra. Lots of algebra, and trig, and other subjects, trying to keep up so that when my kids asked me a homework question I wouldn't be totally clueless. But they've all long since left me in the dust. When I left the Department, however, they were still young, still in grade school or middle school. And my wife, who'd taken extensive leave without pay, was back at work. So I resumed my LWOP year's role as full-time dad. And I've combined that with service on a couple community boards and some civic rabble-rousing when the right issues have come along. And I've had time to explore some academic subjects, mainly in the sciences, that had always interested me.

Q: Any regrets at all about leaving the Department, I mean, you were still young?

NEITZKE: There are always regrets, aren't there? Things you didn't get to, places you'd like to have served, things you might have done differently. But I have no major regrets, not personally. At the time, though, many of my colleagues thought I was crazy. How I could be doing this, leaving at 50, let alone with lots of TIC left. It's not done very often. But I remember Roz Ridgway repeatedly telling us, when we traveled with her on Czech and Albanian Claims/Gold back in the early 1980s, that we in the younger generation of FSOs seemed to want to have it all. We couldn't, she argued, we'd have to make choices. Roz was right. And I'd made my choices. I'd had a good run, nearly 28 years, and then I had other work to do. My kids awaited, and I was looking forward to that.

Q: Great. I guess that is all. Thank you, Ron.

NEITZKE: No Stu, thank you. This has been great fun.

End of 9th sessionFebruary 22, 2007

End of interview